VIDEOGAME CULTURE

JULY 2

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PlayStation 3

Sony shows Microsoft how to launch a console at E3

NINTENDO'S REVOLUTION

Unveiled: the weird new system that plays everything but nothing – yet

XBOX 360 EXPLOSION

Hands-on with every key title for the first next-generation system



PREVIEWED PERFECT DARK ZERO **PREY** ZELDA: TWILIGHT PRINCESS **OKAMI** THE WARRIORS **SPORE** KING K
REVIEWED NINTENDOGS **COLD WINTER** DESTROY ALL HUMANS **PSYCHONAUTS** BOILING POINT **SMART BO**





During E3 in LA we switch on our hotel room television set and up pops Pirates Of Silicon Valley, the 1999 TV movie which chronicles the early days of Apple and Microsoft. (If you haven't seen it, you really should, if only for Anthony Michael Hall's extraordinary Bill Gates.) We don't know if the TV schedulers know that the biggest collection of geeks they've ever seen are in town – over 70,000 of them, in fact, from 79 countries, here to see more than 5,000 games from around 400 exhibitors spread over 547,000 net square feet of space – and lined it up as some kind of acknowledgement, but it immediately transports us back to the early '80s when home computing was about home computers, not operating systems, and the young Bill Gates and Steve Jobs were bitter rivals.

Contrast that with today. If Gates and Jobs aren't necessarily the best of chums, Gates is at least a bloody good customer for Jobs: there are hundreds of Apple Macintosh G5s at E3, each one an Xbox 360 alpha dev kit from which exciteable game developers are demonstrating their upcoming next-generation wares. No, today a more visible rivalry exists between Microsoft's J Allard and Sony's Ken Kutaragi as the respective heads of the companies' pushes into new realms of entertainment. Each has set out a strategy for more or less complete ownership of the living room, and each would have you believe that his company's approach is best suited to the task. The truth is that, right now, no one can make a wholly accurate call on who has the most powerful hardware: Sony's Cell architecture may be finished but its graphics chip is not (at least not quite), while Microsoft, despite being closer to launch, is still running 360 code from single-core CPUs.

We can, however, make calls on the companies' relative standings based on their E3 showings. Read about how PS3 set the agenda from page 8 onwards.



EDGE

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"Disturbing the peace? I got thrown out of a window! What's the fuckin' charge for getting pushed out of a moving car, huh? Jaywalking?"

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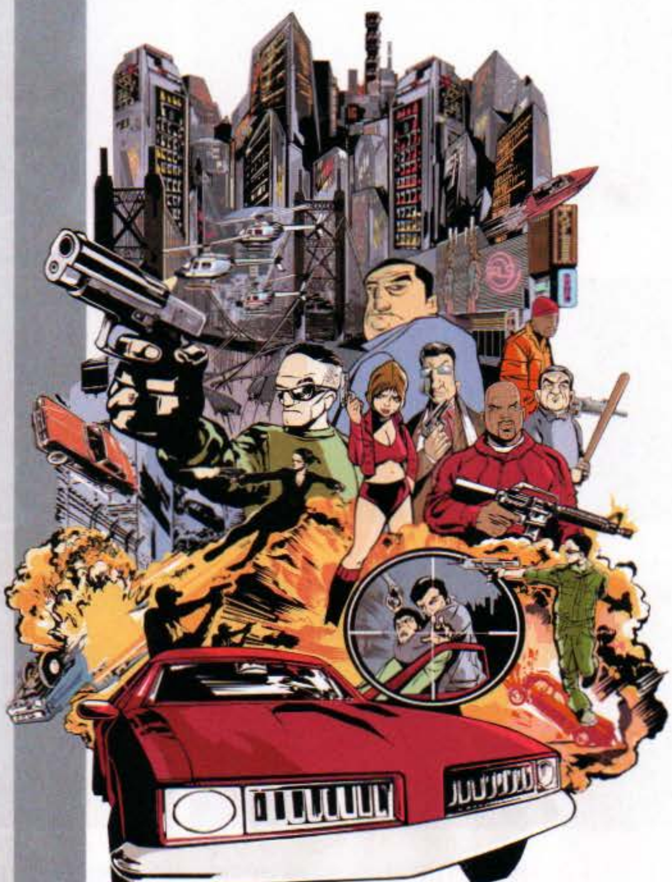
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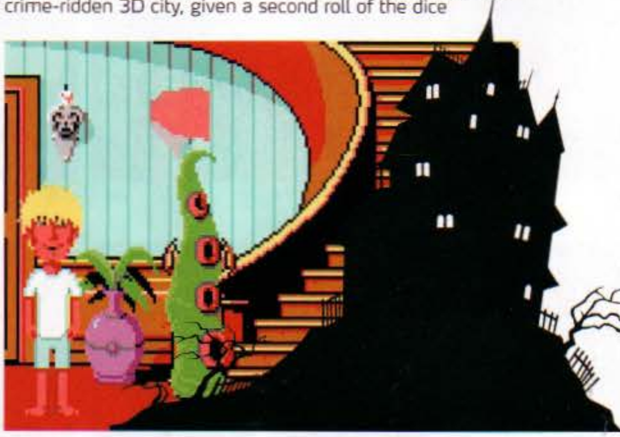
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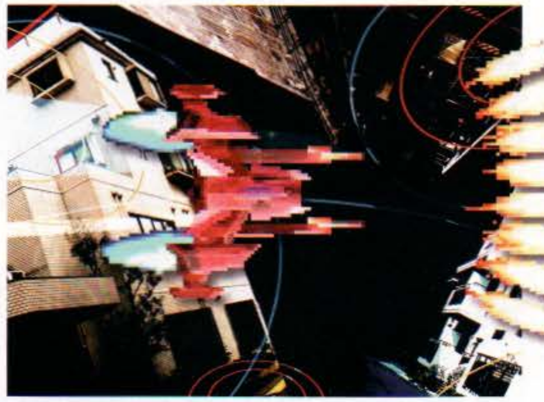
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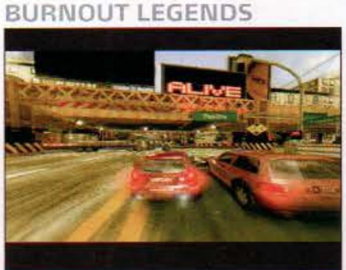
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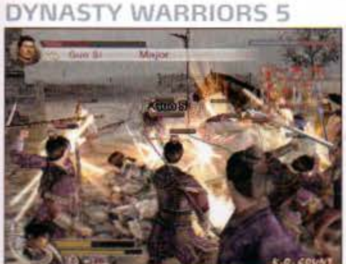
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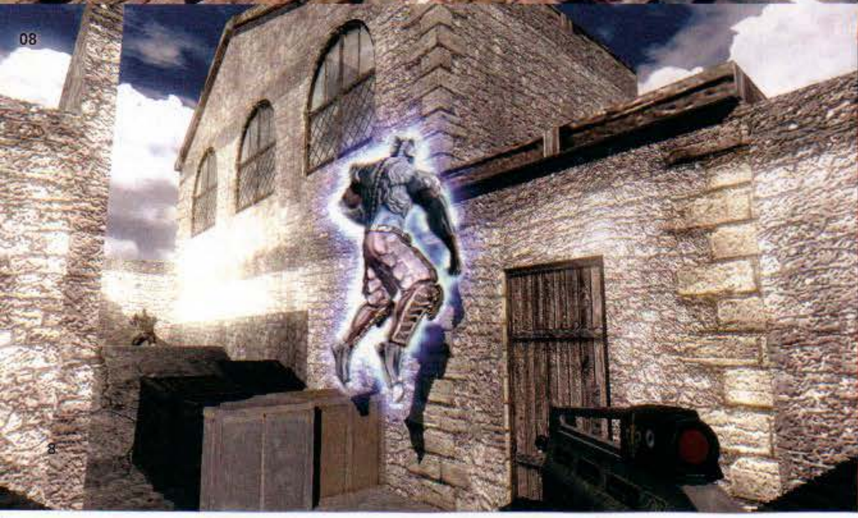

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EVENT

Sony casts PS3 spell at E3

With Microsoft already off and running thanks to its pre-E3 MTV specials, the industry leader had it all to play for in LA...

On May 18, the first day of the Electronic Entertainment Expo 2005, deep within the green-and-white bowels of Microsoft's sleek E3 stand-cum-complex – the sleekest and most expensive-looking of all showings at the event, no less – we find corporate vice president and chief XNA architect **J Allard** in a confident mood. "Next-gen starts now," he pronounces, smiling. "We're ready. Game on." The truth is that neither Microsoft nor its development partners look to be even nearly ready, and internet game journalists have pounced on this, generating reams of copy damning the company's next-generation venture before it's even reached its launchpad. Rare's launch title *Perfect Dark Zero*, in particular, has been on the end of some brutal kickings – this before they've even had the opportunity to play the thing. "If we're evaluating [next-generation] games based on graphics, that's just crappy journalism," says Allard in response. Unfortunately it's not just crappy journalism he has to worry about, because here in an unseasonably sun-withered Los Angeles, everyone, not just internet game journalists, appears to have fallen head over heels in love with Sony's PlayStation 3.

It all begins at a vast studio within the anonymous surroundings of a Sony Pictures lot downtown, where a couple of thousand of the industry's great and good and not so good have been invited to Sony's traditional pre-E3 press conference. For a change, the market leader is to show its hand first, not second, which has been tradition. Word from the inside is that this is going to be 'weird'. Outside, members of the press, worldwide development community, publishers and more besides are being fed and watered, and no one knows for sure what to expect, despite all the

Sony's PS3 video presentation featured a raft of silky-looking prospects, including: 01 *Warhawk* (from Incognito), 02 *I-8* (Insomniac), 03 *Devil May Cry 4* (Capcom), 04 *Tekken 6* (Namco), 05 *Heavenly Sword* (Ninja Theory), 06 *Killzone 2* (Guerrilla), 07 *Motor Storm* (Evolution), 08 *Fifth Phantom Sega* (Sonic Team), 09 *Ni-Oh* (Koei), 10 *Killing Day* (Ubisoft), 11 *Eyedentify* (SCEJ)











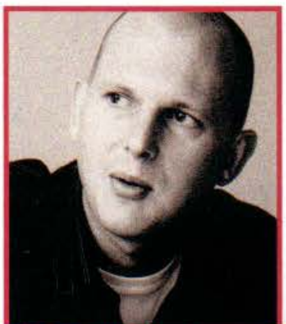


The PlayStation3 hardware is not as immediately amenable to the eye as previous iterations, but Sony is packing in a lot of functionality, with support for home-burned CDs and DVDs, PS1 and PS2 backwards compatibility, and media ports for Memory Sticks, SD and compact flash memory cards. It'll be interesting to see what sort of user takes advantage of its six USB ports. As for joypad design, expect it to significantly evolve in time, since the model shown at E3 was apparently only a prototype

It is clear that Sony's plan is for PS3 to become not only the world's most popular game console but its favourite multimedia device, too

rumour. Something concrete on PS3, though, surely, no? That and a whole lot more.

Microsoft has, of course, already made its next-generation splurge, throwing money into an amateurishly overproduced MTV special and garnering a big story in this week's edition of Time, its cover resplendent with a photo of Bill Gates smiling and holding an Xbox 360 console alongside the coverline: 'Microsoft has finally made something hip – the killer app of video games', so at least Sony knows what its target looks like. Within two hours its response has been fired and it has hit its mark almost as if guided by laser, slamming into Microsoft's side.



Sony Computer Entertainment America chief Kaz Hirai opens the conference truly dwarfed against the backdrop of a screen some ten metres high by 20 metres wide. But instead of trotting out sales charts and market-share analysis diagrams as he has during previous events, he rapidly gets to the meat of today's dish, ushering 'Father of PlayStation' Ken Kutaragi to the stage, whereupon it begins to become clear that Sony is as serious about taking charge in the next generation as it has been with PlayStation2.

It's no surprise to see Blu-Ray compatibility trotted out, allowing PS3 developers access to 54GB of data per disc. Similarly, everyone expected hard drive compatibility (in this case detachable, much like Microsoft's Xbox 360 equivalent). More surprising is the adoption of Bluetooth technology for PS3's wireless controllers, allowing up to seven to be connected simultaneously, and support of not only Sony's own Memory Sticks but SD and Compact Flash cards, too. It is clear that Sony's plan is for PS3 to become not only the world's most popular game console but its favourite multimedia device, too.

But Kutaragi is most keen to talk numbers, specifically floating-point operations per second. With its IBM co-designed Cell CPU working in conjunction with its Nvidia RSX (dubbed 'Reality Synthesizer') graphics part, the architecture handles 218 gigaflops, he proudly relates, pulling up a chart that pits PS3 squarely against Xbox 360, whose combined figure reaches 115 gigaflops. Sony's spin has it that this is a straight 2:1 outperformance. It turns out to be a misleading claim, but it's an easily digestable figure and one the audience laps up.

Of more concrete consequence to gaming in the living room is the revelation that the RSX has the capacity to output via two separate channels,

Q&A: Phil Harrison, executive vice president of development, Sony Computer Entertainment Europe

What is Sony's message at E3 2005?
Wow. That's a hell of a question because there are a lot of messages. From a 2005 perspective it's PlayStation2 continuing to grow, lots of cool games, lots of innovation, at both ends of the spectrum, from *God Of War* at one end to *Buzz!* at the other and everything in between. Obviously from a European perspective you have PSP launch September 1, with lots of games. PSP is obviously a big factor for this Christmas, and I think it'll be the most significant hardware platform launch this year in Europe. Now, the bigger message obviously is what's happening next year, and that's probably what you're most interested in, I would imagine.

You're in a weird position because you have a lot of interesting-looking PS2 games out there on the show floor but at the same time a new piece of hardware, PS3. So your message is split. It always happens at the transition stage, but this time it seems more pronounced.
I think you're right. The generation – and I hate to use this term – tipping point, when you go from whatever the current generation is to the next generation, is not actually when the machine is introduced at retail, it's when the machine is introduced to the development community, because when they start getting their heads shifted you'll see an acceleration of teams moving on to next-generation titles. So as far as I'm concerned the PlayStation 3 or the Cell-based era or whatever you want to call it has already started, irrespective of when the hardware actually comes out. So you're right, we've got this huge sort of schizophrenic ying-yang thing going on, but the person who's buying a PlayStation2 this Christmas is probably buying it for *Buzz!* or *Singstar* or any number of well-established franchises that are being sequeled, and probably doesn't know what has happened here at E3.

Having said that, the scale of this year's E3 is such that the news is reaching out further than it might have before.
True. Actually, having looked at the press clippings just now, it is everywhere. But people still buy presents at Christmas.

OK, what question do you think we're going to ask now? Can you guess?
Ummm... price?

No. What were the demos at the press conference running off?
PlayStation 3.

Everything was using the same kit as the Lots Of Ducks demo you showed first?
No, for safety we actually had multiple hardware units backstage because obviously we're talking about preproduction hardware and software and it would be a brave man indeed who ran everything off one kit.

Well, it all worked.
We actually had no problems with the PS3 hardware at all. The only problems we had at the show was that we were projected 1,080 progressive from all the way at the back of the hall and to get the signal from the PS3 on stage to the projector at the back of the hall was an incredible feat of engineering; we had five fibre-optic cables running from backstage all the way up to the top. $12,000 worth of cable. But no, not everything you saw on the video section was off hardware. It couldn't be because we're still so early on. But I can assure you that everything was done to spec. We're not going to be presenting a piece of hardware and then backing it up with games that are irrelevant or incapable of being generated. And the reason that the presentation was structured the way it was it that I was hoping the technical demos would show the component portions and that Unreal Engine would show that the tools were there, and then when we show the videos at the end you can see that the pieces all fitted together and there was a cohesive story there.

Not everyone will understand what you were doing, though.
Well, inevitably with something like *Motor Storm* we're going to choose more cinematic cameras to make a video than we would in-game cameras but you get the impression of the vision of the game and what we're going to do with it. It's going to be stunning.

So what's your reaction to the reaction – the amount of goodwill there is for PS3 now?
Obviously delighted. I was just chatting to Kutaragi and asking him about the response in Japan. It's very pleasing. Obviously we've worked incredibly hard, incredibly secretly, for a long time, and we did manage to keep everything secret, which is always nice. No disrespect to you as a magazine, but it's nice to share everything with the world in one go, rather than having leaks come out. And we were able to make a bigger impact than I thought we would. And by contrast to our notable competitor, who made a much worse impact than I had expected, which was actually quite disappointing. I had expected more from Xbox 360, to be honest.

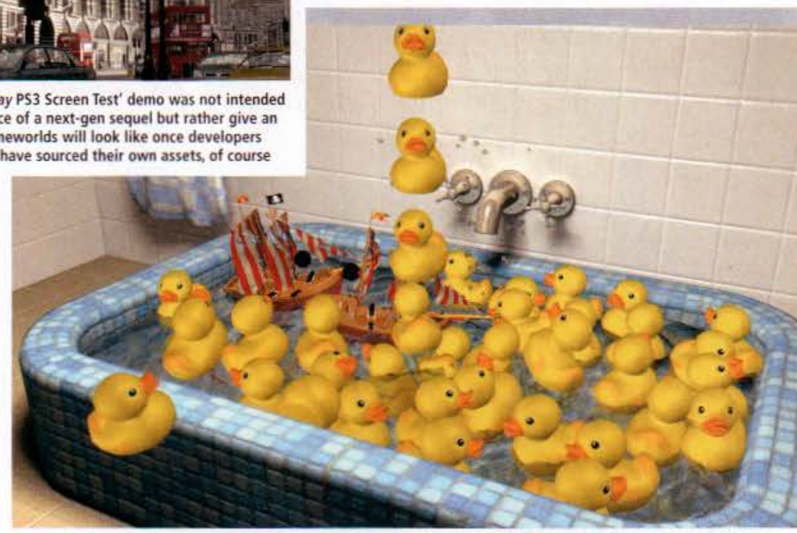




both at 1,080p (not that many people will have two HDTV sets lying around), and, finally, the first demonstration of what it can actually do via Nvidia's self-engineered Luna character, whose visage looms large on-screen. And then it moves. The subtlety of what it's doing, notably with a thoroughly beguiling pearlescent effect on Luna's suit and a parallax-mapped backdrop that looks almost real enough to touch but is in actuality constructed from only a handful of polygons, is unfortunately somewhat lost in this environment. But those who've been following Nvidia's progress in recent years are fairly satisfied (RSX is claimed, after all, to offer power in excess of two GeForce 6800 Ultras). Meanwhile, senior members of the retail trade appear eager to see something they can actually sell. They will have to wait, because now it's time for Epic uberguru Tim Sweeney to demonstrate a sequence from the Unreal Engine 3 which has been ported to PS3 during the two months the developer has had dev kits. The action, a run-and-gun chase featuring a musclebound warrior being pursued by a Terminator-esque foe, unfolds across the 10m x 20m canvas, at 1,080p each pixel measuring approximately 1cm tall and thrown up there by four HD front projectors in tandem (Sony later assures us that PS3 imagery will naturally be much brighter when fed directly to HDTV screens). It is quite mesmerising, more so when Sweeney stops the action mid-flow and pans around it in realtime just to prove that it's real. (Apparently, Sony had offered Epic the opportunity to run its

Sony London's '*Getaway* PS3 Screen Test' demo was not intended to confirm the existence of a next-gen sequel but rather give an indication of what gameworlds will look like once developers get up to speed – and have sourced their own assets, of course





The most charming demo among Saony's line-up at its E3 conference involved rubber ducks, toy boats and the introduction of a standard EyeToy peripheral to the mix. Sony is also working on a hi-definition camera for PS3

So that makes your job easier?
No, it doesn't, because we've never – you've asked me this sort of question before – we've never been driven by what a competitor is doing or what another technology is doing, and we're always going to be able to do our own thing.

But saying, for example, 'We have two teraflops, Microsoft has one' – that's an easy sell. It's very soundbitey.
Yeah. But to be perfectly honest we're undercooking our number. Slightly. Not by a huge amount.

At Nintendo's pre-E3 press conference Reggie Fils-Aimes was playing up DS's sales against PSP's to date. What do you think's going to happen longer term?
I think it's going to be down to the fact that PSP has the best games, the most games, and the broadest support from all the industry players. That's what people who go into shops on September 1 are going to see – they're going to see 30-odd games for sale for the PSP and probably 60 or 80 by Christmas, maybe even more.

Having said that, though, aren't many people who're buying PSPs right now buying them almost just to have

> We've worked incredibly hard, incredibly secretly, for a long time, and we did manage to keep everything secret, which is always nice. It's nice to share everything with the world in one go, rather than having leaks

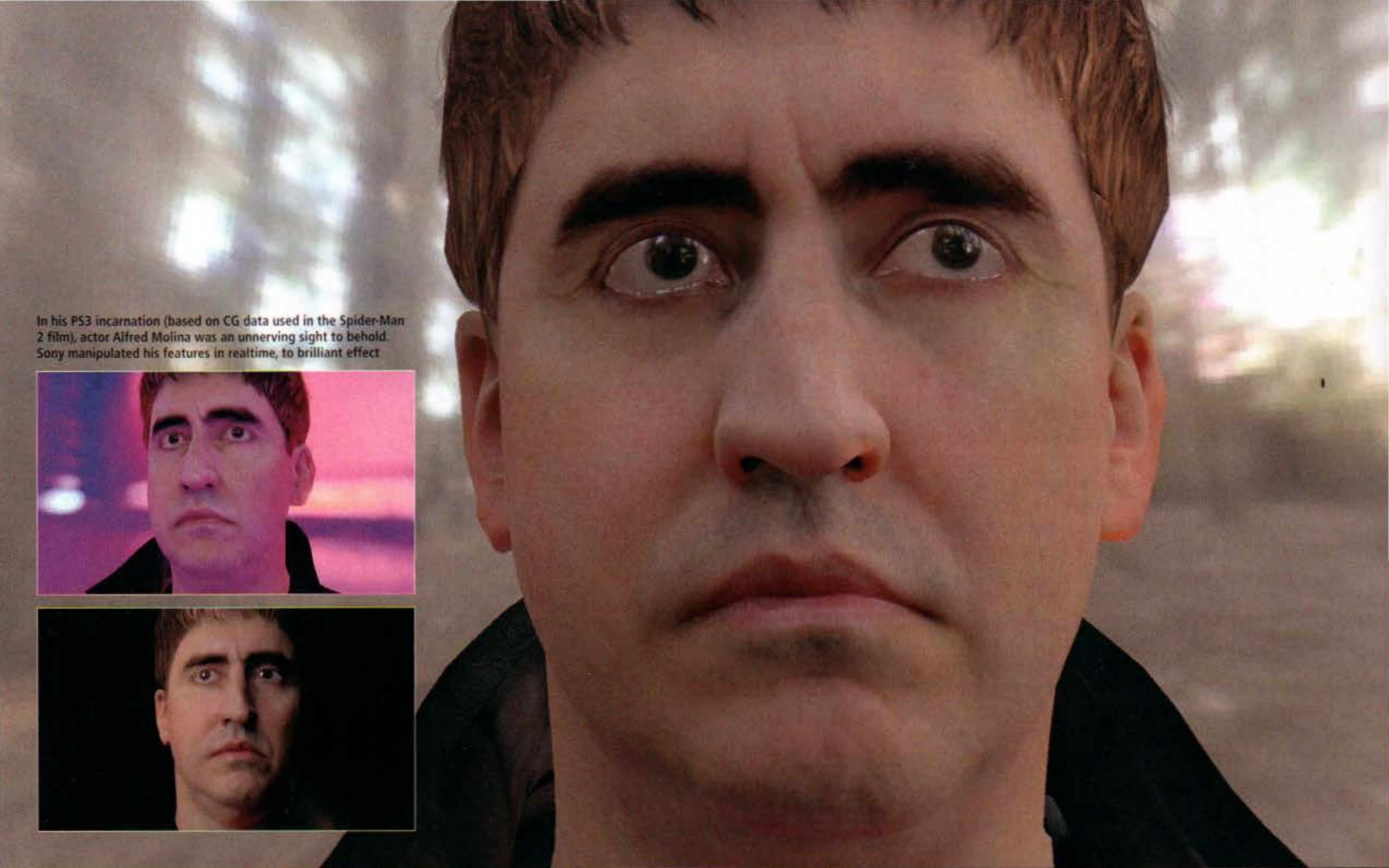
PSPs? Is it an image thing?
Your cover [issue 138] was good at communicating that. Obviously a product like PSP is going to have an element of lifestyle purchase associated with it. Nothing wrong with that.

In terms of hardware design, PlayStation 3 certainly seems more... traditional.
They perform a very different function because PSP is very much a public device and the technology and the form factor are one and the same, whereas PS3 by very nature of its Bluetooth connectivity can be a private device – it can be hidden away; you could even have it in the cupboard. They perform different roles. Oh, and before you ask, the PS3 controller you saw at the conference is not final.

Does that mean you're not especially pleased with the way it's designed?
No, it's just that it wasn't particularly clearly communicated that it was just a design study and there's been all sorts of chatter about it.

It doesn't look like a typical Sony design. OK, last question: PlayStation 3 – bigger teams, longer development times, more expenditure, more risk...
I don't actually agree with that.

But doesn't maths dictate that, if you're a small publisher, with PlayStation 3 you only have the budget to put out only three titles where once you might've been able to put out six, you absolutely need those three projects to be hits, that's there's less room for error?
The bit I don't agree with is the claim that it'll take more people to make PlayStation 3 games. I actually think it's cheaper to make PS3 games than it was to make PS2 games at launch. The reason for that is by virtue of the nature of the relationship with Nvidia, in particular, we get not just a component to sit in the middle of the RSX, we get an entire toolchain that comes with it. CG, and all the pipelines and all the shaders and all the plug-ins which are very well understood in the development community today – all of that comes across instantly as part of the toolchain. And on the Cell side of things IBM brings a lot of weight to the table. Also, unlike PS2 where the Emotion Engine, VU0 and VU1 required hardcore programming, the SPEs within the Cell are general-purpose CPUs which are programmed at a much higher level to get that performance, so you don't need the low-level programming skills. Furthermore, there's the issue of being able to outsource to complementary industries – we proved this with the Alfred Molina demo, which we actually did in London. This is not a word of a lie: we phoned up Sony Imageworks and said: "This is what we want to do, could we borrow some of your data?", and they said, "Well, we'll send it to you but you're mad – there's half a terabyte just for that one shot". I don't know if you know Spider-Man 2, but there's a shot with Doc Ock, right at the end, when he dies, he falls backwards and it starts with a full face shot – they sent us the CG just for that facial capture and it was over 500 gigabytes of data, and we're able to run it in realtime in a system that has less than one per cent of the memory. So you can outsource a lot of it. I don't think that team sizes need to be bigger, and it means that complementary toolchains work straight away on PS3, which we never had on PS2. I think it all has a lot of implications for game development.



In his PS3 incarnation (based on CG data used in the Spider-Man 2 film), actor Alfred Molina was an unnerving sight to behold. Sony manipulated his features in realtime, to brilliant effect



The latest in Nvidia's line of trophy females, Luna is obviously the most attractive yet, thanks to the company's RSX architecture. Her hair may not look especially realistic in static shots, but it's alive with detail when moving. Also note the parallax-mapped background, which consists of only a small number of polygons



technology demo from video, but the swaggering North Carolina-based studio insisted on doing it for real. After all, a landmark realtime demo sells your 3D middleware to the world's slavering PS3 development community much more effectively than something spooled off video, right?) Job done, audience enraptured, Sweeney leaves the stage, possibly to consider how Epic's currently strong commitment to both PS3 *and* Xbox 360 is going to pan out.

Next up is the more familiar sight of SCEE's Phil Harrison. The PS3 technology remains out of sight, but something strangely familiar soon

Apparently, Sony had offered Epic the opportunity to run its technology demo from video, but the swaggering North Carolina-based studio insisted on doing it for real



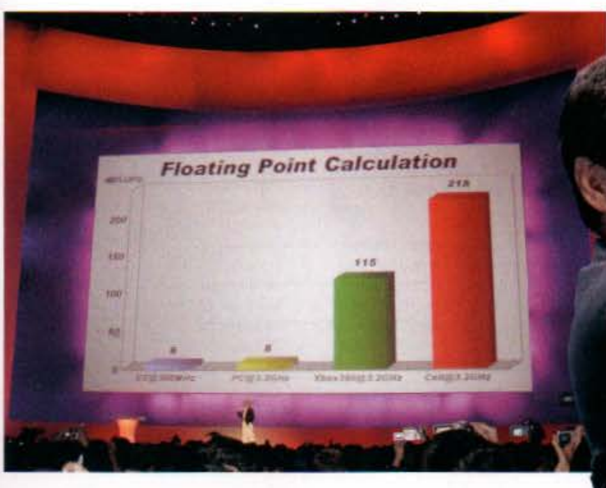
graces the screen. The rubber duck floating in the bath that was once used to show what PS2 could do – only the tiles on the bathroom wall gleam and glisten this time around, the entire scene is an incredible amount sharper and the water itself, though still looking fairly artificial, wobbles with a heightened sense of realism. Harrison throws his magic switch and the duck is joined by a pair of cutely modelled pirate ships which proceed to bomb the hell out of each other; he throws the switch further and the bathtub becomes filled by a cascade of additional ducks, bobbling and bouncing against each other like the little toys they're supposed to be, gently spilling over the side by the propulsion of a convincing physics system. Then, just because he can, he wheels out Dr Richard Marks, the man behind Sony's EyeToy, who holds up a pair of gaudily coloured plastic tumblers in front of his invention and proceeds to scoop up water and slosh it between corresponding glass tumblers onscreen. It has nothing to do with gaming, but it splashes charm, and Harrison is the consummate showman who knows he has the audience in the palm of his hand.

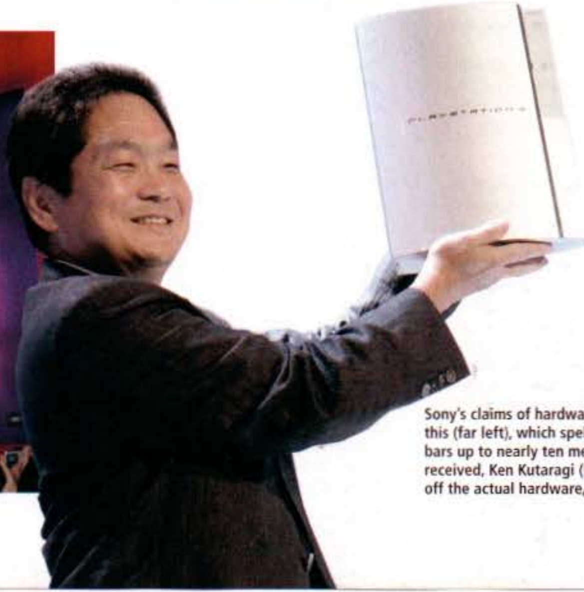
He musters up a scene in which flowers and plants appear to grow in realtime as the camera pans through a leafy glade – technology, he says, that might one day be put to use in roleplaying games. Another demo, definitely the most unusual of the day, blends action from the Spider-Man 2 movie with that of a next-generation *Gran Turismo*. It is a clever splice, and yet no one knows what it's really for or how it's relevant to PS3 gaming.

Of more immediately evident value is Sony London's so-called '*Getaway* PS3 Screen Test' demo, which reuses assets from the gangster game series at new resolutions and levels of clarity, and emulates how a Piccadily Circus scene would be viewed via a tourist's camcorder, cleverly replicating features such as automatic white-balance



Epic's Unreal Engine 3 demo was an illustration that PS3 isn't going to be quite the awkward beast PS2 proved to be – Tim Sweeney's team's vast OpenGL experience no doubt assisting in taking the PC code and reworking it within two months





Sony's claims of hardware superiority hinged on slides such as this (far left), which spelled out floating-point performance in bars up to nearly ten metres tall. Given the way the demos were received, Ken Kutaragi (left) probably didn't even need to show off the actual hardware, but he just couldn't help himself



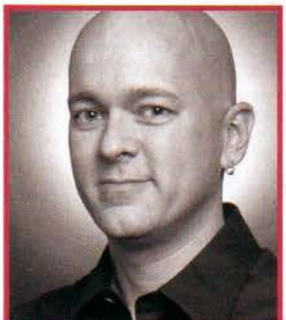






Microsoft is certainly further down the line with console design: various removable fascia designs were on show at E3, along with the 360 remote control unit. The special-edition E3 '05 fascia (far left) was a gift to those who attended Microsoft's conference

Some assiduously applied shaders pick out skin tones on the 3D model of Alfred Molina, making it almost indistinguishable from the real thing at a quick glance



correction. It is evidence that gameworlds are soon to take a significant step closer to appearing real, but another demo Harrison has lined up does a better job of convincing the audience that PS3 will be able to deliver on Sony's promise of 'movie-quality graphics'. This piece of code generates an almost full-screen-height-sized replica of actor Alfred 'Dr Octopus' Molina's head. Some assiduously applied shaders pick out skin tones on the 3D model (based on the original CG content used in Spider-Man 2), making it almost indistinguishable from the real thing at a quick glance. Blinking, and with light sources subtly reflected in its eyeballs, the simulated face emanates a sinister kind of hyperrealism. It is one of the event's highlights.

Electronic Arts' turn at the crease sees it attempt to generate a similar kind of response with the fighters in its demo of *Fight Night: Round 3*, but fall slightly short. Nevertheless, the simulated elasticity it imbues in its boxers' faces as they're contorted by incoming blows (the impacting gloves themselves deforming as they hit home) is totally absorbing and paves the way for the kind of detail the company will be striving to pack into its sports titles and beyond.

Was there an opportunity for Square Enix's Yochi Wada to take to the stage and show a realtime-generated version of what Final Fantasy VII would look like it it was remade on PS3? Yes, there was – and the RPG fans in the audience wolfed down every last delicious morsel of it.

Having entertained the audience for so long, there is nothing left for Sony to do, of course, than to fire up a video showreel demonstrating the development talent it already has on board. Up pops evidence of *Devil May Cry 4*, then a new *Tekken*, a strangely empty but nevertheless atmospheric-looking wild west title from Rockstar, *Killzone 2* from Guerilla, *Motor Storm* from Evolution, a new Gundam game from Bandai, Sonic Team's strange-looking FPS *Fifth Phantom Saga*, *Heavenly Sword* from Ninja Theory (see p24), a Ubisoft FPS entitled *Killing Day*, the expected

Q&A: J Allard, corporate VP, Microsoft

What's Microsoft's message at E3 2005?
Next-gen starts now. We're ready. Game on. I think we've got the product and the line-up that's really going to push gaming to the next level. We're going to turn innovation leadership into market leadership now. And one personal message I have is really challenging everyone in the industry to think about really broadening this business because from a numbers point of view, from a dollars point of view when you add up the business, we're doing really well, but that's because we're having to replace the hardware so frequently and the games are so expensive [but] that doesn't go on forever. So how do we get out to more people? A lot more people read books or magazines or watch TV or movies than play videogames, and we need to change that.

Why did you commit to launch Xbox 360 when you have?
It's when we're going to be ready, honestly. We've basically been working on the project for about three years now. We picked IBM and ATI and basically worked out where the power curves were going and where the price points were and obviously we got done before the other guys.

Last time you had the most powerful technology, this time it looks like you may not...
[Interrupting] Why not?

OK, let's talk about what Sony has said...
Let's talk about that. Just because we didn't have a science fair for a press conference doesn't mean we're not going to be more powerful.

Do you want to comment on Sony's performance figures?
Sure. I'll say two things. First, you have to look at the overall power of the system. You can't just look at hardware – that's just the first frame of reference. Any machine that comes out in this era is going to be so complex that the only way you can take real advantage of it is with great tools. So you have to add software to the question, and we're the undisputed leaders in tools out there. And then you look at where gameplay is going, and the importance of online can't be overlooked. I think you have to aggregate hardware plus software plus services and say: what is the power of the platform that you're handing to game developers? Because it's all three of those things. When you add all those three things, we win. Then you say, OK, the science fair on Monday [Sony's press conference], how do you respond to that? First thing I'll say is that they made a lot of noise about floating-point performance, which is only one attribute of a game. If you actually look at a game's make-up it's actually only about 20 per cent floating-point performance – where Sony does have an edge – and it's 80 per cent integer performance, where we have a 3x edge. The other part is that they'll be dismissive and say, well, we have 512MB, too, and the same frontside bus bandwidth. But our 512MB isn't divided. We haven't ascertained how much is for graphics and how much is for general-purpose – the developer gets to choose. So, while it's technically true that we have the same amount of memory, we allow developers to deal with it differently. And the last thing I think is the amount of DRAM on our graphics part, and while it's only 10MB, it's 10MB with smoking performance right next to the pixel shaders, and so you're going to be able to do some great things with special effects. So I

There's no way, no how Sony are going to be 2x the performance of Xbox 360 when they come out three or four months after we do, at the same kind of pricepoint, with the same amount of die area – you can't do it

look at the hardware spec alone and I say you could look at it and in some cases it's similar, in some cases we have an edge, in some cases they have an edge – it's hard to decide. I think the real decision is going to come from the game developers – that's where you can go and throw in that question – but there's no way, no how they're going to be 2x the performance when they come out three or four months after we do, at the same kind of pricepoint, with the same amount of die area in that box – you can't do it. They're synthesising the same sand with the same number of transistors, and we've designed the box for game designers. Who've they designed the box for?

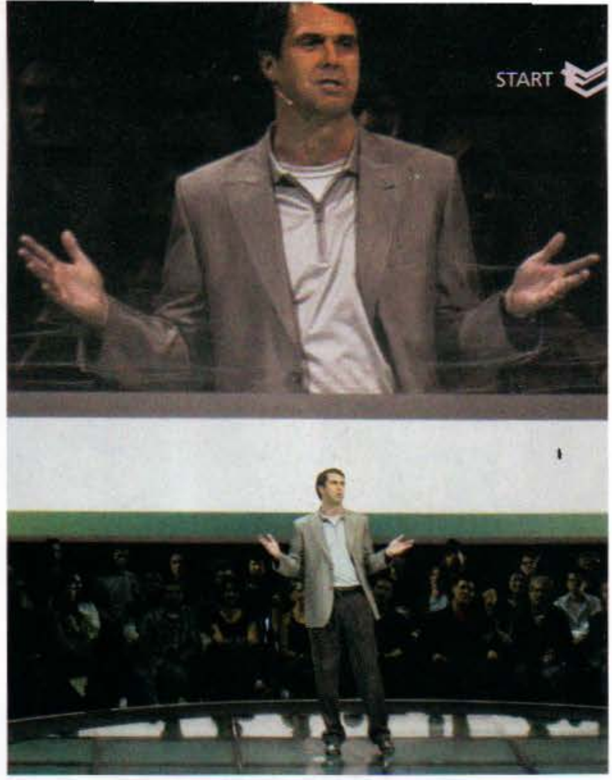
What's your opinion on the Nvidia part?
We don't know enough details about it. As much as Jensen talked at the conference, he didn't actually reveal a ton of details. I think the split-memory architecture could be a challenge. I do think from a programming point of view, and what they're doing with shaders, it could be interesting to see how many people actually take advantage of the specifics of the Nvidia part with the crossplatform releases because it's really going to require different different programming models to take full advantage of it.

How about Xbox 360's backward compatibility?
The approach we're taking is



historical battler from Koei, and more. Certain evidence, especially that offered up to illustrate *Killzone 2* and *Motor Storm*, looks suspiciously prerendered, but the audience doesn't seem to care right now. In fact, once the video has finished most of the people in the auditorium are too busy either applauding and/or looking at each other with a sort of stupid 'Did you see *that*?' kind of look welded to their faces. It is a remarkably robust show of strength from the industry leader – and, even though it's running late and threatening to spill into the time Microsoft has earmarked for its own press conference happening soon across town, it isn't finished yet. First, it has to show the actual hardware, something Kutaragi proudly handles himself. And suddenly some of the good work is undone. Though it's still due one final minor revision, the PlayStation 3 hardware looks like the third iteration of 3DO hardware that Panasonic never got the opportunity to make, only with the addition of a logo bewilderingly rendered in a slightly bastardised version of the font popularised by the Spider-Man movies. The controller design, too, casts aside DualShock convention seemingly in an attempt just to be different and new, ending up looking like a bargain PC joypad with a 'wacky' boomerang-style shape. But whatever, seems to be the general opinion. Sony had a job to do – that is, spoil E3 for Microsoft – and it's done it. The bombs have been detonated and their shockwaves will reverberate for at least the rest of the week, and far beyond the San Andreas Fault.

As the Shrine Auditorium begins to fill up with those looking to see how Microsoft would handle its pre-E3 showing, the question circulates: what is that special section of seating behind the stage going to be used for? Is there going to be a





Robbie Bach spells out Microsoft's 360 vision to the rapt attention of some hired hands (top), while the console itself makes an arrival in a bag brought to the stage – a strange sight considering there was nothing about the hardware left to be revealed by this point

software based. Obviously we have a different instruction set on the CPU and we have a different graphics partner, but we've done the right licensing deals in order to do software-based emulation. And our approach is to be tackling the games at the top of the list first and we'll get as far down the list as we can.

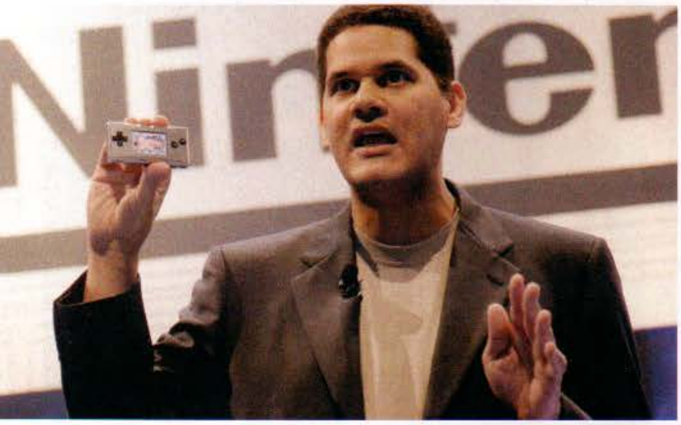
Why was it important to do it?
It'll be interesting to see if it was important. It was a stone we didn't want to leave unturned. Before you've got the games line-up, before you're in the market, it's one of those interesting things to talk about, just like what's the name of the box, what's the price of the box, people talk about stuff that doesn't seem that interesting on the outside. Is it really meaningful to gamers? We don't know. The press loves to make a big deal out of it. And then you do some real research and you say, well, would you like it to be backward compatible? And the answer's always yes. How do you ask the question? Because if you asked them if they wanted to be able to play phonograph records, the answer would be yes. But what you're willing to trade off or how often you'll use it is something people have a hard time trying to ascertain. When you show them a launch line-up and you have *Perfect Dark* in your hands it might be the case that you don't want to pick up that old copy of *Splinter Cell*. I don't know.

Aren't we a little close to launch to be at alpha stage with the dev kits?
Just like E3 2001, man! We had alpha kits everywhere. The engineering on final hardware has been going great, we want to roll production, and the crappy thing is that as soon as you make the first Xbox 360, you're done – that's the spec for the rest of the 360s off the line. So you want to hold out as long as you can, squeak every bit of performance you can out of the system, and I know it's hard for game developers; it's always going to be a steep landing for any of these systems. We've tried to ease that by creating great tools so that they can be really productive on the alpha kits but it'd be a lie to say it's not going to be a challenge for them to hop from alpha to beta to final, and we're going to do our best to help them manage through that, and we'll be ready this year.

When do you think we'll see Xbox 360's equivalent of *Halo*?
I remember back at E3 2001, when people beat the crap out of *Halo*. "The framerate's terrible, it's a crappy PC port, the controls are all bad, told you you couldn't do firstperson shooters on consoles, you were an idiot to buy Bungie, you should've just shipped it on PC, we told you this wasn't the future of console gaming, you're wrong, FPSes won't work, it was a bad acquisition, the game's terrible, it looks terrible, and it's not fun." Remember all that? But it worked out OK. What game is it going to be? I don't know, but I've played *Perfect Dark Zero*, and I look at *Perfect Dark Zero* and they've done some really amazing things in terms of the gameplay mechanic and some people were like: 'Well, I saw the MTV thing and saw this little snippet or saw this crappy screenshot and I don't really get it'. If we're evaluating games this generation based on graphics, that's just crappy journalism. I mean look at *Grand Theft Auto* – [sarcasm] great graphics. Y'know, if you looked at a screenshot would you say *Grand Theft Auto* would sell ten million? Is there a trailer in the world you could've constructed in 90 seconds to suggest it was going to be a ten-million seller? No. Could you have done it with *The Sims*? No. Did we do it with *Halo*? No. *Pokémon*? [Sarcastically] That was a real breakthrough in graphics. The four biggest franchises in the last decade were not evaluated on their graphics potential, so I think we have to look a little bit deeper, and just like in 2001 we're not there enough in terms of people really being able to get in and get a feel for it and make a judgement call. I think the jury was out on *Halo* until somewhere pretty close to November.

So the 'when' issue is a difficult one?
It would be nice to say it was going to be on day one. *Halo* was a combination of factors. One: they'd be working on the game for, what, four years? I'm not trying be unfair to Bungie – I think it was about that length of time – they'd been investing in that for a long time, and they'd been developing it on PC, which closely approximated the final Xbox hardware, so the jump they made was a pretty moderate jump. And what they did in the last three months, they took all that bad publicity from E3 and that fired them up, in a big way – they proved the world wrong. So what's it going to take? It's a complex series of things. There are guys who've been working on content and game concepts for years; they're going to be launching early with Xbox 360, so that component is true. From an architecture point of view we've had devkits out there for over a year, so we're trying to minimise that jump and we've lined up some really, really good guys. The question is, do you have anybody that takes all three of those variables and has a great game concept that's going to light up the imaginations of consumers? I hope we do. What we've tried to do is have the best guys and give them the best tools for the job and manage it through the transition, and we think they'll strike gold again early.







The yearly tradition of queuing in the morning sunshine outside the Hollywood & Highland Complex for Nintendo to open its conference doors continues (top). Reggie Fils-Aimes was typically professional when showing off Game Boy Micro, although there was no direct mention of kicking ass





Satoru Iwata (top) confirms to the assembled crowds that the final Revolution hardware will be approximately the size of three DVD cases stacked up. Meanwhile Shigeru Miyamoto is joined on stage by a fellow *Nintendogs* fan, before asking her if she'd like him to teach her some new tricks backstage (this is actually true)

special 64player *Perfect Dark Zero* multiplayer session to demonstrate what Rare has managed to achieve with its Xbox 360 launch title? No. The seats fill up before the presentation even begins. With people – young men, young women, black, white, all races – hired to cheer and whoop whenever something even slightly exciting is even touched upon, in the hope that the cheering and the whooping will rub off on the non-hired attendees and make the whole shebang go off with more enthusiasm. It is a cynical, stiffly engineered exercise and proof that, as with its Xbox 360 MTV specials, Microsoft still has much to learn when it comes to understanding the line it needs to tread with promotional activity.

Allard is the sort of ambassador you can trust to deliver the goods, but right now, on stage, he appears nervous. He's clearly been briefed on what has transpired at Sony's event – or at least attendees' reaction to it – and you get the feeling that he knows what's coming simply won't measure up. If he is predicting this, he deserves credit for being able to read a situation.

The trouble, obviously, is that Microsoft has little left in the pot, save for the announcement that Xbox 360 will be somehow backwards compatible. Certainly it hasn't got the software support to match up to that on offer at Sony's event: a

Q&A: Shigeru Miyamoto, general manager, entertainment analysis and development division, Nintendo

What is Nintendo's message at E3 2005?
First of all, this is a trade show, so we want to tell the people who are going to sell our games what we have ready for you. And we want to let you know that Nintendo is trying to do something very unique and new with the Nintendo DS. And concerning next-generation consoles, you've seen new consoles from Microsoft and Sony and we have announced Revolution, and concerning Revolution we haven't told specifics because we are trying to do something unique with it, but we can't explain that right now because there is some time until launch and we don't want it to be copied.

It was announced at Nintendo's press conference that you're taking up a director's role on a completely new game. How important is it for Nintendo that you're seen to be doing this?
When Mr Iwata became president of Nintendo he decided that my time is best spent making games. And recently I have been looking after the development of many international games abroad but Mr Iwata said he'd look after that, so I am now internally developing games again.

But you're almost a brand in yourself – how does that pressure affect you?

> I want to enjoy game development. Finding something unprecedented that has never been done by anyone else is a good thing – it stimulates the developer's mind, it's a very good thing

I think that feeling pressure to make very anticipated sequels to games that are absolutely 100 per cent fun will not do any good for me. So I want to enjoy game development. Finding something unprecedented that has never been done by anyone else is a good thing – it stimulates the developer's mind, it's a very good thing. If you're just trying to make something that's like what everyone else is doing, only better, it's not good for game development.

How about online? For a long time Nintendo said it wasn't interested, but this year you're embracing it. What's changed?
One thing I must make clear is that nothing has changed within Nintendo as far as online gaming goes. We have been continually doing online experiments and investing in it but we have determined that online gaming will not be a big business, and we told that to analysts. But that information somehow got to the gamers themselves and it was interpreted as: 'Oh, Nintendo is negative on online games', although that's never been the case. The real case is that online isn't easy to access for everyone, plus you have to pay a monthly fee for connection, plus to deliver online gaming the maker itself has to run a huge server and when you set up a huge server and you do not know whether a million people or only 10,000 people are going to play, it's a huge investment for the maker. And for me, myself, one of the reasons I haven't worked on online games is that when I finish a game I want to move on to a new game, but with online you have to keep up maintenance, and that's why I haven't been so keen. As you know, DS and Revolution have wi-fi and we'd like many users to play online easily –concerning expense, we worked out a method whereby users won't have to pay.

What sort of games do you think Nintendo should be making for Revolution?
[Smiles] I can only say unique, because you know we have previous franchises, we will have Mario, we will have *Super Smash Brothers*, we will have *Metroid*, they will be new and cool, but other than that we can't say anything. *Nintendogs* is on DS because of the touchscreen and the microphone and those functions are critical for these games. Of course, we could have made cuter-looking, more realistic puppies on the GameCube but for the uniqueness we put it on DS. We are thinking of a unique Revolution title.

So what actually happened to *Mario 1*...
[Finishing the sentence] *Mario 128*? [Laughs]

We have to ask.
I think we're going to have to keep *Mario 128* until we can overcome the present steady flow of Mario games. We have many kinds of Mario games at this point but as to whether we're going to have *Mario 128* on Revolution, I can't say that.

Has your approach to making games changed at all in recent years?
For the last four or five years the environment of making games has changed. We now have very beautiful graphics, so we have to increase the number of artists. More than just making unique and more interactive games we have to make more beautiful games, so the environment has changed a lot, and recently I have started making games again as a director, so that's a big change.

What are you most excited about at E3?
I haven't had a chance to leave the Nintendo stand yet!

And what about on Nintendo's stand itself?
Of course, I think the *Zelda* project is the most important one, but on DS with *Nintendogs* and *Electroplankton* I'm very curious about how people will like those when they touch them.



nonetheless pretty sequence from *Dead Or Alive 4* goes on for too long, a *Kameo* demo looks cute enough but isn't particularly smooth, and an appearance by Square Enix's Yochi Wada, who'd hotfooted it along from Sony's briefing, to announce that *Final Fantasy XI* – a game PS2 owners have been playing for ages, of course – would be available on Xbox 360 proves hardly enough for the baying industry representatives in attendance. Nevertheless, EA development kingpin Don Mattrick pledges that his company is 100 per cent committed to Xbox 360's launch, and that it has over 25 games in development for the platform – more than it's had for any other console in the past at this point in its development. (EA also has more internal development capacity than it's ever had in the past, of course.)

EA development kingpin Don Mattrick pledges that his company is 100 per cent committed to Xbox 360's launch, and that it has over 25 games in development for the platform

Without the firepower of a scale worth flinging back in Sony's direction, Microsoft reverts to more ill-advised marketing tactics thanks to Xbox marketing and publishing chief **Peter Moore**, who attempts to summarise the appeal of Xbox 360 to the audience thus: "Like many people in the audience this evening, I am a runner. There's that place that you can sometimes reach on a long run where you achieve a kind of perfect mind-body equilibrium. It's been called the Zen of running. [With] the HD era we're going to deliver the Zen of gaming… The result is… that you become completely immersed in the game itself. This controller becomes an extension of your body, it becomes the gateway to the Zen of gaming."

We shift uncomfortably in our seats and become aware that a few hundred other people in the auditorium are doing the same thing. Evidently, Microsoft is still learning. PS3 represents Sony's

Game Boy Micro is incredibly light, and Nintendo is confident that it'll fit comfortably in your trousers, "no matter how tight they are." Revolution, meanwhile, is far from finished, although Iwata proposes that it'll provide "new experiences"







SOUND BYTES

"Judging from the extrapolated sample of people that came, I can safely say that 100 per cent of gamers want more adventure games. These are the kind of hard statistics that a publisher can bank on."
Ron Gilbert reflects on a recent Amsterdam meet-up of blog friends and fans: somebody get this in PowerPoint form to LucasArts

"Am I the only one who expects a collapse of the gaming business soon? I can't see how people will keep shelling out $50 or so for a videogame when the games have hardly changed since the invention of the firstperson shooter... When my kids show me a game, I usually say that it's nothing but the same old running-jumping-kicking-shooting with a new background. They leave in a huff."
PC Magazine writer **John C Dvorak** either laments the homogenisation of the games industry or proves parents just don't understand

"In short, the fact that John C Dvorak doesn't know shit about videogames does not mean the industry is doomed. John: listen to your kids, and shut the fuck up."
EGM executive editor **Mark McDonald**'s 1UP.com blog response suggests that he feels it's the latter

third stab at a videogame console and it knows how to play the game. Where, for example, Sony has evocative if, when it comes to the crunch, misleading names for its hardware (eg, its Reality Synthesizer), Microsoft has just anonymous parts. Where Sony's Harrison cracks a gag about his demo making use of LOD ("lots of ducks") and backs it up with some vivid on-screen imagery, Microsoft attempts to win us over with meaningless mumbo-jumbo. The Xbox 360 technology, and indeed Allard's overall vision for the platform – which is clear where Sony's PS3 equivalent is hazy, to say the least (just when will the company implement a full online strategy, or does it really not believe such a thing to be of significant consequence?) – deserves better. At least live sets by The Killers and The Chemical Brothers at the after-conference party demonstrate that Microsoft can put on a bash.

The new handheld draws incomprehension from much of the audience, although no doubt retailers are rubbing their hands at the prospect of GBA games being given a new lease of life

The following morning it is Nintendo's turn, at the Hollywood & Highland complex. Just like every year, this press conference is so full of goodwill you can almost touch it. Unfortunately, over the event's duration it slowly seeps out as Satoru Iwata, Reggie Fils-Aimes and Shigeru Miyamoto hang their hats on two DS titles already out in Japan (*Nintendogs* and *Electroplankton*) and the latest iteration of the GBA hardware, dubbed Game Boy Micro. Using a rechargeable battery pack and an appealingly diminutive and customisable case design, the new handheld draws incomprehension from much of the audience when it's revealed, although no doubt the retailers present are rubbing their hands at the prospect of GBA software being given a new lease of life.

And then, finally, there is Revolution, a console that will play any Nintendo game ever made via downloads (presumably paid for, although it isn't made clear). The most un-Nintendo-like console ever, Revolution's set-top-box-like appearance is matched by its functionality: as well as being a gaming device it can operate as a DVD player. As for the controller? Nintendo is showing nothing, but invites us to speculate what a controller capable of comfortably handling NES, SNES, N64 and GameCube games might be like.

More Mario spin-offs, more GameCube *Zelda*, the announcement that Miyamoto is embarking on a new project – this is precisely what is expected from Nintendo's E3 showing, and it becomes clear that now, more than ever, the company is running at its own pace, refusing to say when it'll be launching its own new console, or show what it'll be able to do. But then the next-gen console war is probably messy enough as it is.



With an attendance figure in excess of 70,000, this was the busiest E3 ever. The left-hand line here (above) was for unregistered journalists, and at one point was apparently three hours in length











Pac-Man's anniversary is celebrated with a suitably massive cake and a typically American sense of occasion (above left), while elsewhere NCSoft's *Auto Assault* is promoted by a girl with her backside hanging out





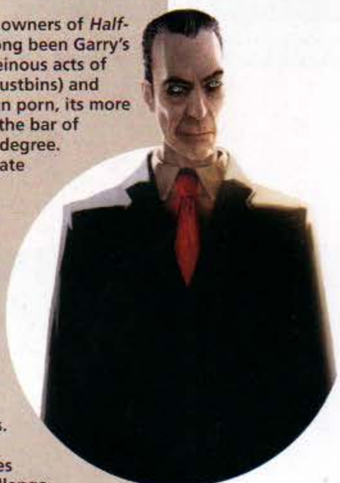
'Chang3' wasn't some celebrity FPS player in the mould of Fatal1ty but actually a part of Sony's PS3 publicity drive. Namco put on a special show to mark the return of the *Soul Calibur* series (above)



Photography: Suzanne Bernel



SOURCE AND EFFECT



Of all the weapons available to owners of *Half-Life 2*, the most terrifying has long been Garry's Mod. Having inspired several heinous acts of Combine-tipping (usually into dustbins) and intricately choreographed G-Man porn, its more recent applications have raised the bar of complexity to an awe-inspiring degree. Take, for instance, the recent spate of Rube Goldberg devices constructed (over quite some time, we wager) to hang, drown, launch and detonate the unsuspecting characters placed therein. As an elaborate demonstration of Havok physics, they're impressive and often incredible to behold, pulling all manner of conventional game objects together to perform essentially simple tasks. Demo and save files, together with videos and other challenges can be found in the Garry's Challenge section of www.facepunchstudios.com



INTERVIEW

An agent for change

Released from one Matrix and plunged into another, Shiny president David Perry escapes to discuss his concerns in the real world

The release of *Enter The Matrix* saw its developer, Shiny, evicted from its offices, kicked between publishers and finally mauled by an expectant press. The licence, however, salvaged revenues of more than $300m and an opportunity for Shiny to reload with *The Path Of Neo*. As he strives to reassure disillusioned fans, company president **David Perry** is also doing his bit to shepherd the games industry into a difficult next generation.



Infogrames chairman Bruno Bonnell has asserted that the sales of *Enter The Matrix* validated its content, but your recent presentation in Berlin readily highlighted its shortcomings. How did its development and mixed reception affect your outlook?
Enter The Matrix was our first game on the PlayStation2, as well as our first game on the Xbox and GameCube. Somehow, we finished on time and hit number one in the charts, and that's what a publisher loves to see. However, as a developer, we are always trying to learn how to do better, to plan better, to execute better. We had an extensive post mortem and made a ton of changes to how our company functions – tripling the size of the team, for example. And now we've got the chance to make the Neo game that fans of the films wanted so passionately the first time around.

But adapting the vision of others doesn't leave a great deal of room for personal expression. As a creator and designer, doesn't it get frustrating, working for so long with subject matter that isn't your own?
Not at all. If I'm a fan of the movie Predator, when I buy my *Predator* game I want it to be as close to the movie as possible. If some dude at the game developer decides to get creative and messes up that experience, that's going to be a problem. As a developer, when you sign up to work on a licensed property, it's essential that you check your ego at the door. You're working on something that belongs to someone else – is someone else's creation – and, frankly, you're doing it because you loved what they created in the first place.

Do you feel that consecutive *Matrix* projects have put you in a position where you can't produce the original games you'd like to?
Being one of the 'old' guys in the business, I'm very fortunate to be able to make just about any game I like. Atari is an incredibly supportive company creatively, and I think you'll see that demonstrated during the coming years. They want product champions, people that believe in what they're doing. Besides the sales potential, I felt it would be good for us all to make *Neo*. It's what I'd buy if I weren't working for Atari or Shiny. As for becoming a sequel company, I'm already working on the concepts for Shiny's next original title. As our fans demand, it'll provide some highly creative new hooks and experiences and will be for next-generation machines.



Shiny's mission with *Path Of Neo*, as is evident above, is to compensate gamers for the previous Matrix game's neglect of both established characters and memorable set-pieces


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Though the retelling of the first movie is clearly the new game's big draw, freshly devised training missions and moments from the later movies will also feature

As their proximity grows, which characteristics of the movie industry do you think the games sector should try to copy, and which to avoid?
I think one of the most important things about the film industry it that it's allowed to dream. A director will say: "I want to see time slow down and the air to turn into jelly" and instead of being told "our engine can't do that" or "that's never been done before, it'll take too long, let's not bother", people dive in and make it happen. It doesn't matter if it requires new tools, new ideas, new technology or massive workloads; the vision is created. I would like to see more people like Will Wright and Peter Molyneux in our business, who can steer their ship into uncharted water and create fresh experiences. They'll come as more game directors show they have what it takes to keep making hits.

Your personal website, www.dperry.com, encourages new industry talent through communication and the exchange of knowledge. Is there a structure that could be put in place to make the most of such dialogue and its benefits?
Ultimately, I would love to have the time to really build it out and make it a hub for this purpose but even in its simple state it's working. I've had many, many people write to me saying the advice worked and they now have jobs in the business. So now I'm working on a book that I'm also doing for free. There's currently a team of people researching all forms of game design to help make a reference manual for use in colleges.

You've also alluded to an industry policy whereby individual creators are hidden from the public eye by a corporate veil. Is this an active attempt by games publishers to bolster their own brand or does it simply reflect increasing team sizes and a decline in individual creative authority?
Publishers still think their brand is all that matters and that's a mistake, because it's both the brand and the individual creativity that matter. If I tell you there's a Tom Cruise movie that Warner and Universal turned down and which is now going to be released by some outfit you've never heard of, that will lower your expectations for the product despite the famous name. The best combination is a really well-known, reliable company and a big-name creative talent: Shigeru Miyamoto and Nintendo, Will Wright and EA – these suggest quality. Publishers need to identify their key talent and give them brands they can associate with, which will also get us relationships with external industries. Then you'll have big Hollywood people like James Cameron or Peter Jackson calling up saying: "I want to work with Peter Molyneux" rather than: "I want to work with Eidos".

Is the upcoming generation of hardware narrowing the creative scope of developers, focusing too much on the HD-era philosophy of technical refinement and limiting the capability of small development teams?
Not really, because there's always an available format for small teams. They can make PSP titles, DS titles or phone titles and if they truly have the skills, they'll dominate those markets and then be funded to do whatever HD project they like. Rather boringly, I look at HD as just more pixels, more detail. Creatively, though, the extra processing power will give designers new tools such as more onscreen characters, more complex AI and dynamic limb locomotion. The people that need to worry are the artists who are good but not great. If I were such an artist, I'd be studying like crazy right now to preserve my career.







Perry is keen to stress that, though it may look familiar, *Path Of Neo* has a far more diverse fighting system than you might expect, closer to *Devil May Cry* than *Max Payne*

Newswire



New kings for the swingers

In a turbulent month of mergers and acquisitions, a comparatively harmonious example has been set by Blizzard Entertainment and its latest asset, *Metal Arms* developer Swingin' Ape Studios. Based within a few miles of each other in California, the two companies have expressed their excitement at the deal, no doubt reflecting its mutually beneficial nature – Ape recently turned round the perception of Blizzard's delayed, now revamped *Starcraft: Ghost* (see p62). With the retention of all staff and a role as Blizzard's dedicated console development team, the acquisition is expected by Ape president Steve Ranck to prove "a seamless transition".

EVENT

Sega holds its fire at Private Show

The company's latest in-house expo suggests promising developments while unveiling few





SNK Playmore's 2D fighters still drew crowds, but attention will now be on the recently announced Arc System Works (*Guilty Gear*) Fist Of The North Star game



Despite its new fighting system, many were unimpressed with the new Atomiswave *Samurai Spirits*' visuals

Despite high expectations, Sega's Private Show in May was marred by the absence of its next-gen arcade hardware. In evidence instead were titles indicative of the company's severance from its current generation boards. While Sega itself announced two new IC Card games – *Star Horse 2* and *Gundam 0079 Card Builder* – it openly revelled in the success of existing favourites such as *Derby Owners' Club*. Sammy revealed an equally slim line-up consisting of two Atomiswave titles: *Neo Geo Battle Coliseum* and the disappointing *Samurai Spirits Tenkaiichi Kenkakuden*.

As for the major revelations, only hints were provided, suggesting a more substantial Private Show in the summer. Expected from Sammy are *King Of Fighters XI*, *Guilty Gear XX Reload* and *Hokuto no Ken*, though the appearance of that anticipated new board, currently in development at Sega, makes the future of Atomiswave uncertain. Similarly, Tri-Force development appears to have halted, while *Gundam* was confirmed as being the last Chihiro-based title.

The suspicion is that Sega's new board will be Xbox 360-based, using DVD-ROM and debuting in arcades in the guise of *Virtua Fighter 5*. Additionally, the demos shown at E3 are believed to be upcoming arcade titles. The board's nature points to a strong possibility of conversions to Xbox 360 during 2006, with the notion of a Live-enabled *Virtua Fighter* set to explode heads the world over.

Continue

The hidden bits of E3
We can't tell you about them just now. You'll see

VIP treatment at E3
Front of the queue, is it?

Elijah Wood at E3
The ex-Hobbit sat next to us for Ubi's *King Kong* presentation. Nice chap

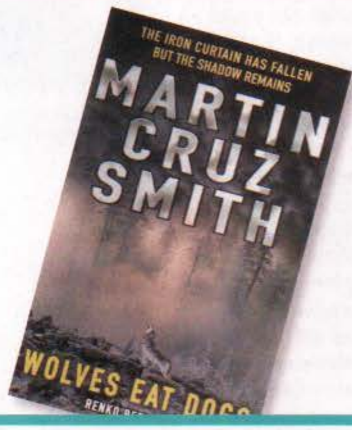
Quit

Steven Spielberg at E3
Muscling in on one of our appointments? Just who does he think he is?

The crowds at E3
Broke all records. Hassle

GTA clones at E3
Really, stop it. No, really. No, really! NO – REALLY

Author: Martin Cruz Smith
Publisher: Macmillan
isbn: 0 333 90750 7



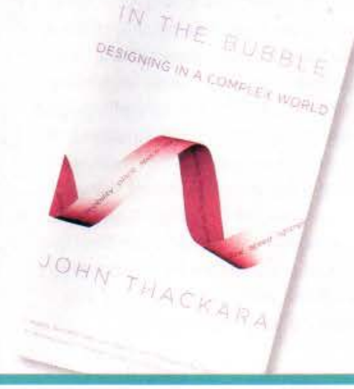
WOLVES EAT DOGS

Does a murderer stalk the Chernobyl exclusion zone?

As an ideal location for tales of eerie discontinuity and loss, it's surprising the nuclear disaster at Chernobyl hasn't been more fully utilised before. Local developer GSC Gameworld is continuing with its could-be-genius, could-be-disastrous *STALKER*, but that and Robert Polidori's book of photography, Zones Of Exclusion, seem to be the measure of recent inspiration – until Martin Cruz Smith's latest novel, that is. He's already shown aptitude for eastern European settings, not least his 1981 breakthrough Gorky Park, and it's the everyman police inspector Renko Arkady who again picks up the reins here.

Following the seemingly clear-cut suicide of an ex-physicist-cum-billionaire-oligopolist, Arkady struggles against bosses keen to take the path of least resistance. But after finding the dead man's wardrobe full of salt (as well as expensive suits), Arkady begins an investigation. His suspicions are further fuelled as business rivals move in to try and take over the company. After body number two is found with its throat slashed in a radioactive graveyard in the Chernobyl exclusion zone, the action really starts. From then on, despite its sparsely written style, Wolves Eat Dogs picks up pace and never lets go, with Arkady chasing mysterious figures through the abandoned tower blocks of workers' town Pripyat and the black villages of illegals who have returned to their irradiated homes. Gripping stuff.

Author: John Thackara
Publisher: MIT Press
isbn: 0 262 20157 7



IN THE BUBBLE

Stress, happiness and waste statistics – together at last

Journalist and thinker John Thackara is out to re-examine the rules by which the modern environment works. As a global society, we are too focused on technology rather than the desired end results, he argues. It's a situation that's resulted in many problems for a world economy that relies on the constant movement of 244 million containers and the stress placed on natural resources and our own individual lifestyles. To that extent, In The Bubble is a call to think more carefully about how to create a sustainable future on both macro and micro scales.

And Thackara has certainly done his homework. The book is peppered with pithy anecdotes and pop statistics. Did you know that the creation of a laptop results in waste products 4,000 times the weight of the finished product or that the environmental impact of the average North American is a million pounds of waste matter per year?

This isn't to say that he takes a Luddite approach. Deployed correctly, technology can have positive effects, he points out. For instance, the adoption of RFID tags and GPS technology means objects can be tracked, enabling people to swap ownership of relatively rarely-used items such as power tools or cars with a pooled approach. His strongest vision is to counter the assumption that the world is out of control. It might be complex, but it remains the result of previous decisions. Our challenge now is to ensure future choices are made on a more thoughtful basis.



A DEVELOPER'S DIARY

Ninja Theory's Tameem Antoniades concludes his next-gen push

One reason the going has been tough is that we set ourselves some very ambitious goals that were met with incredulity: A non-Japanese developer trying to create an ambitious fighting system? Film-like production values? Fight among several thousands of enemies at once? Engage players emotionally? A physics-based world in a fighting game? "You guys are crazy..." as one publisher put it.

Our luck, instincts, game demos, whatever, gave us a second chance allowing us to re-emerge as Ninja Theory and finally sign our next-gen game *Heavenly Sword* to a publisher. I can now reveal that we have signed up *Heavenly Sword* to Sony Computer Entertainment Europe (SCEE). A perfect partner for us: ambitious, focused and out to redefine entertainment.

It's mid March 2005, and SCEE asks us: "Can you produce something for E3?" E3? Where 3,000+ games are shown each year and 1,000+ never-before-seen games debut? The first E3 where next-gen games will be publicly shown? Where 5,000 journalists from around the world congregate to see the latest and greatest? In less than eight weeks time? You're damned right we can!

People were suprised that a next-gen game could look so good. People were delighted that the game was breaking the myth that next-gen games would play it safe



Setting ourselves challenges such as producing a game where the player fought among several thousand enemies at once was bound to make the going difficult – but it was worth it

We decide to go for it whole hog. There isn't a lot of time to create something in-game that can be shown publicly but we're not about to let this opportunity go. It'll be tight and risky but we've never shied away from that kind of thing before. I think we can do it... just!

Come May, we have edited our in-game footage into a short trailer. It's looking good but we have nothing else to compare it against! Nina, Mike and I fly out to E3. I have a feeling of dread in my heart. *Heavenly Sword* isn't a simulation, where you focus on realism, nor a sequel, where you build on what was there before, nor a licence, where you have a ready-made fan-base. The expectations are harder to gauge and even harder to meet. I hope our efforts are good enough!

So, to an audience of over 2,000 people in a special screening at Sony Pictures, *Heavenly Sword*, among about 14 other next-gen games, is shown for the first time in a digital cinema theatre featuring a massive 20m x 10m screen in all of its 1,080p glory! We are the only no-name studio to appear alongside the big heavyweights of development. The audience is stunned upon seeing it and cheers and hollers in delight.

The next day, Phil Harrison does a really nice introduction of Ninja Theory, our team and *Heavenly Sword* to an audience of around 1,000 people at the SCEE press showing. Again, people cheer and holler, this time even more enthusiastically.

It is clear from people talking to us after E3 that several games shown by Sony knocked people's socks off, Heavenly Sword being one of them. People were suprised that a next-gen game could look so good. In particular, people were delighted that the game had a unique sense of style breaking the myth that next-gen games would play it safe. This was the stuff of dreams!

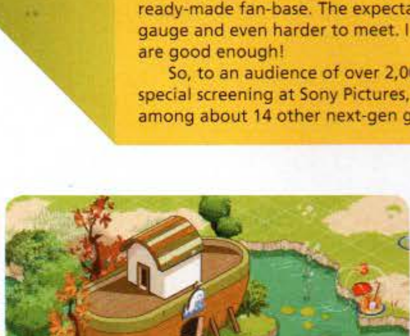
For now, we are in that rarest of positions: a new independent company making a highly-anticipated original game exclusively for a next-generation platform. We are living proof that even a small team (by next-gen standards) can create technology, art and gameplay that can compete with the biggest players.

We've come through with a good team in place, an exciting game, a great publisher, and summer's almost here! In the back of my mind, I am fully aware that nothing can be taken for granted. The competition is always fierce, our customers are demanding and that magic ingredient, luck, is fickle as hell.

Now that we are signed up, I feel that this diary has reached its natural conclusion. I believe that I have been frank and honest and that I have given you a taste of what it's like developing a next-generation game. We'll take it one game at a time from here, focusing on the quality of each, growing our team and making sure we are competing at the upper end of the world development stage. Fingers crossed, we'll do ok. It feels good to end the diary on a positive note for a change!

Until next time, thank you Ninjas, thanks **Edge** and thanks to all the guys at SCEE!

Take care!



INTERNET GAME OF THE MONTH

Dofus

www.dofus.com/

No, it's not a typo. *Dofus* is a French phenomenon in almost every sense of the word. A vibrant 2D MMORPG, it has some fresh ideas to match its fresh-faced looks. Running in Flash and requiring next to no installation on your PC, *Dofus* intends to offer quick-fix online adventuring from wherever you are. Combat shares many traits with grid-based SRPG traditions, but takes place in tiny, instanced versions of your environment, and friends can hop in to help you as you battle. Character types are admirably varied, both in appearance and function (although, admittedly, you'll be hard pressed to pick up their finer points in the tiny, beautiful sprites which represent them), and the whole world has a powerful sense of charisma and humour – providing your French is up to the challenge.

If it isn't, then don't be put off by the prospect of missing dozens of dazzling puns about people being boring or pregnant or both. The English language beta has recently opened and the full game will launch in September.

INCOMING

Announcements and updates – fresh-from-E3 special

Frame City Killer
FORMAT: 360 **PUBLISHER:** NAMCO



This Unreal 3-powered effort was done few favours by very early footage, but its *Shenmue*-for-sociopaths gameplay could impress

Frantix
FORMAT: PSP **PUBLISHER:** SONY ONLINE ENTERTAINMENT



This rapid-fire maze runner – no action buttons, just run, collect and exit – was one of the most platform-aware PSP titles to date

Aeon Flux
FORMAT: PS2, XBOX **PUBLISHER:** MAJESCO



Finally getting her day on console, thanks to the new film, the realism is offset by exaggerated animation and off-kilter stances

Dark Sector
FORMAT: TBA NEXT-GEN **PUBLISHER:** TBA



Digital Extremes' early-bird next-gen title continues to intrigue with its stylish mechanical design and Japanese drum soundtrack

Project Gotham Racing 3
FORMAT: 360 **PUBLISHER:** MICROSOFT



Bizarre's racing series is polished to a blinding sheen, and footage seems to suggest an almost *Ridge*-like handling dynamic

Monster Hunter Portable
FORMAT: PSP **PUBLISHER:** CAPCOM



No online play, but it could become one of the most joyous PSP wireless titles. New side-games will focus on the infamous cats

Advent Rising
FORMAT: PC, XBOX **PUBLISHER:** MAJESCO



For all its epic pretentions and lengthy development time, this Orson Scott Card-penned sci-fi is a two-fisted shooter at heart

Evil Dead Regeneration
FORMAT: PS2, XBOX **PUBLISHER:** THQ



After years of lowerering their expectations for Evil Dead games, fans may be pleasantly surprised by this capable-looking actioner

Armored Core: Formula Front Special
FORMAT: PSP **PUBLISHER:** AGETEC



Agetec has given the AI fighting game a drastic tweak, featuring all-new playable combat in single- and up to fourplayer modes

We Love Katamari
FORMAT: PS2 **PUBLISHER:** NAMCO



Coop proves smart and engaging, with concerted cooperation required to achieve anything other than travelling in a slow spiral

Stranglehold
FORMAT: NEXT-GEN **PUBLISHER:** MIDWAY



John Woo and Chow-Yun Fat will be taking their signature moves to next-gen consoles, with the *Psi-Ops* team on development duty

Scarface: The World Is Yours
FORMAT: NEXT-GEN, PC, PS2, XBOX **PUBLISHER:** VIVENDI



Whether it can draw on the source material as well as *Vice City* remains to be seen, but it clearly takes itself more seriously

Bounty Hounds
FORMAT: PSP **PUBLISHER:** NAMCO



Slightly more than a sci-fi *Dynasty Warriors*, hundreds of collectable (and tradeable) armaments looks to be *Hounds'* draw

Virtua Tennis World Tour
FORMAT: PSP **PUBLISHER:** SEGA



The quality of Sumo Digital's *OutRun 2* port bodes well for the fidelity and extras of this cherished franchise's console hop

Beat Down: Fists Of Vengeance
FORMAT: PS2, XBOX **PUBLISHER:** CAPCOM



Cavia's *GTA*-without-the-cars roaming fighter sees your wronged mob enforcer taking back the streets one broken jaw at a time

Marvel Nemesis: Rise Of The Imperfects
FORMAT: GC, PC, PS2, XBOX **PUBLISHER:** EA



This superhero fighter's decision to step away from 2.5D sparring into a *Def Jam*/*PowerStone* amalgam appeals, at least in theory

Death, Jr.
FORMAT: PSP **PUBLISHER:** KONAMI



DJ was never going to rewrite the genre, but the controls are solid, the action satisfying and the meat theme park medium rare

Age Of Empires: The Age Of Kings
FORMAT: DS **PUBLISHER:** MAJESCO



Taking more than a few cues from *Advance Wars*, the PC strategy epic goes turn-based and seems to retain much of its depth

George Romero's City Of The Dead
FORMAT: PC, PS2, XBOX **PUBLISHER:** HIP



No social commentary, just ceaseless, cathartic splatter (and Tom Savini-directed splatter at that) in Kuju's crowd-clearing FPS

Phantasy Star Universe
FORMAT: PC, PS2 **PUBLISHER:** SEGA



Early indications suggest that this shares the tranquil grandeur of the Dreamcast original; new classes and weapons add freshness

Devil Kings
FORMAT: PS2 **PUBLISHER:** CAPCOM



Sengoku Basara is to shed its name, historical storyline and painterly colours for a darker, supposedly western-appeal vision

Mage Knight Apocalypse
FORMAT: PC **PUBLISHER:** NAMCO



The tabletop wargame leaves its combat dials behind for a cooperative action-RPG with an organic skill advancement system

Call Of Cthulu: Destiny's End
FORMAT: PC, PS2, XBOX **PUBLISHER:** HIP



Survival horrors have cribbed from Lovecraft for years, so it seems only fair he should be dedicated a *Silent Hill*-style affair

SSX On Tour
FORMAT: GC, PS2, XBOX **PUBLISHER:** EA



The fourth *SSX* entry offers skis in addition to the traditional snowboards, and EA's ubiquitous create-a-character functionality



Nintendo's Game Boy Micro, in all its guises, is sure to prove popular in Japan, where consoles are more disposable than in the west

SOMETHING ABOUT Japan

Blown away by E3, or lost in translation?

Famitsu PS2 magazine's Koji Aizawa offers his own take on the world's videogame circus



Like many of my colleagues from Japan, I attended the hardware manufacturers' E3 conference as a member of the media – I'm in charge of Famitsu PS2 magazine in Japan, of course – but also as a big videogame fan.

Sony was the first to set out its vision. This included the astounding Cell processor, which has a level of power that only supercomputers were able to deliver just a few years ago; a demonstration of the new machine's GPU; then a series of videos from PS3 titles still in development. A little before the conference I met up with SCEJ vice-president [Masatsuka] Saeki. He told me that "after today, you will know almost everything about the machine, except its price and release date." I was blown away when I realised he really meant it. What can I say? It was quite a show. The incredible power and charismatic line-up clearly supported the PS3's claim to be the leading platform for the next generation of consoles.

But then, I have some doubts. I mean, this incredible level of power sounds too good to be true. Again, the hard disk drive will not be included as standard with the machine – it seems Sony has abandoned the concept of having a video-recording feature to add PSX-like functionality. Then there's the fact that some of the features seem too much: why include six USB ports when you can already connect seven controllers wirelessly using Bluetooth?

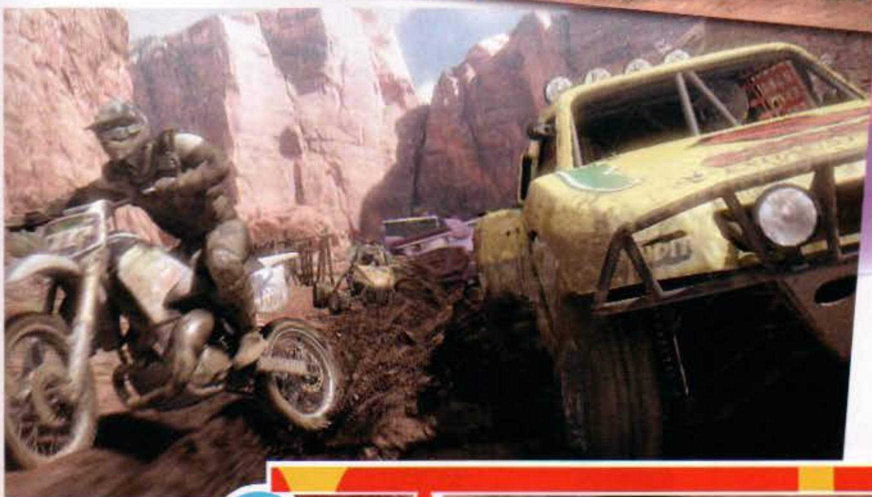
I predict the next generation of consoles to be focused on networking, and I'm already anticipating some kind of war over the download business. This will enable the console industry to reach a new high over the next few years

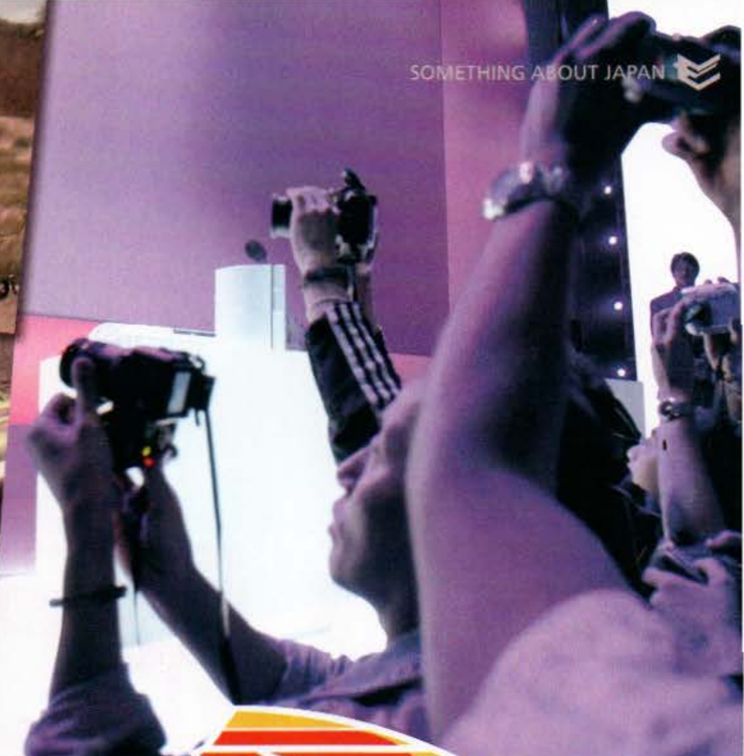
Despite these qualms, the powerful visual display on the big screen was still incredibly exciting. *Vision Gran Turismo* caught my attention, as did *Killzone* and *Motor Storm* from SCEE. There was the very impressive *Gundam* demonstration from Bandai, and though it was only a technical demo, Square Enix's spectacular *Final Fantasy VII* sequence. The demo from Team Soho featured a very realistic representation of London! Many of them were prerendered sequences, but they still had the desired effect on the audience.

So what about the other big players? It seems the first next-generation machine to be released will be the Xbox 360, and I thought Microsoft's conference went well – certainly not badly. I could tell that this time around Microsoft had spent a lot of time and effort trying to appeal to Japanese game makers, and I was particularly impressed with the number of playable 360 games during E3. Notable offerings include Activision's *Call Of Duty 2*, Sega's *Full Auto* and EA's new *Need For Speed* game, as well as the footage of *Dead Or Alive 4*! All these games were beautiful in high-definition, and crisp enough for me to fully realise the benefit of Microsoft's vision for HD. I think the backwards compatibility with the first Xbox and the huge update to Xbox Live will also be hugely popular.

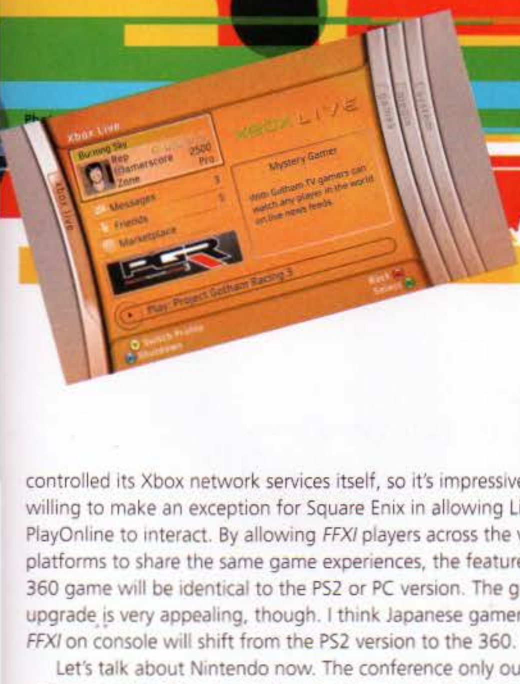
I was surprised by Square Enix's decision to port *FFXI* to the 360. Previously, Microsoft always







Evolution's *Motor Storm* video (right) during Sony's pre-E3 event caught the attention of Aizawa, who reckons that downloads on 360 via Xbox Live (below centre) spell out a true path for gaming's future













Square Enix's Yochi Wada (right) pledged Xbox 360 support in the form of MMO *Final Fantasy XI*, which will coordinate Xbox Live with PlayOnline. Ken Kutaragi spells out his PS3 plan loud and clear (below)

controlled its Xbox network services itself, so it's impressive that it is willing to make an exception for Square Enix in allowing Live and PlayOnline to interact. By allowing *FFXI* players across the various platforms to share the same game experiences, the features of the 360 game will be identical to the PS2 or PC version. The graphics upgrade is very appealing, though. I think Japanese gamers playing *FFXI* on console will shift from the PS2 version to the 360.

Let's talk about Nintendo now. The conference only outlined the main concepts of the Revolution, but it was still a fun show.

It seems the Revolution will be an advanced GameCube with DVD video, the ability to network with the DS, and the ability to download from Nintendo's entire game catalogue, among other things. But in terms of its controller, the mystery remains. Although it is supposed to be the most important element of the Revolution, it looks like Nintendo will be keeping it under wraps for a little bit longer at least.

As for the Game Boy Micro – OK, so it's not a truly new and revolutionary piece of hardware, but it is still really cool. I had the chance to use one during E3 and it was even smaller than I had imagined – really light, but surprisingly easy to use. I already think I'm going to buy a whole bunch of them!

One other thing I remember was the theatre inside Sega's booth, where they were screening technical demos based on classic titles: *Virtua Fighter*, *After Burner*, *Sonic* and *House Of The Dead*. This indicated what the next generation of consoles could deliver, but what was more exciting was the idea that Sega could be developing such games again.

After soaking in all that E3 has to offer, I predict the next generation of consoles to be focused on networking, and I'm already anticipating some kind of war over the download business. I guess they've all been inspired by the iPod, but this time it's a question of music, video and videogaming.

If the strategy seems very similar across the three makers, don't be fooled. They actually have very distinct approaches in terms of how they intend to use downloading. This will hopefully enable the console industry to rebound over the next few years, maybe even reaching a new high.





Hype at E3

The new hardware unveiled this year has given developers more potential that ever. So where are they aiming? Zombies. World War II. Guns. Cars. Cars with guns. It's inevitable that the bigger the jump to the next-gen consoles, the more conservative many early design documents will have to be, but there's no question that playing it safe is becoming an epidemic. The upside? That the old ideas have never looked more spectacular, and that the truly new ideas shine all the brighter.

Nintendo

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p61 Tomb Raider Legend
p61 Tony Hawk's American Wasteland











Perfect Dark Zero

■ Format: **360** ■ Developer: **Rare**
■ Publisher: **Microsoft**

As an Xbox 360 launch title, *PDZ* has a lot to prove – something of which its developer is only too aware, prefacing our E3 demo with more caveats than we think we've ever heard prior to viewing an upcoming game. Clearly there's a lot of graphical progress in the offing – the current build chugs and blurs when you move your viewpoint – but Rare has thought long and hard about FPS mechanics over the years this has been in production. A new roll manoeuvre is used for evasion; all weapons have secondary-fire modes and some have tertiary options, too, allowing you to use, say, X-ray vision; up to four weapons can be carried if they're all pistols, but only one if it's something especially meaty like an assault rifle – the list of nuances goes on. Don't rule out this one as a turnaround title.









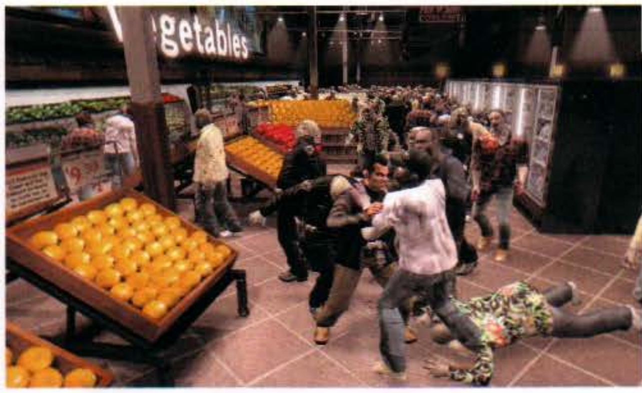
Dead Rising

■ Format: **360** ■ Developer: **In-house**
■ Publisher: **Capcom**

Only one zombie game (and there were a few) at E3 had the official George Romero seal of approval, and yet Capcom got closer to the feel of the director's early work than any other developer. And it did so by making its undead shufflers just about as dumb as undead shufflers come. But then it had to, really, because when you're facing up to something like 300 of them at a time (Capcom reckons the final number will be more like 1,000), the odds have to be evened out somehow. Set in one sole location, a massive shopping mall, your photojournalist protagonist must set about getting to the bottom of what's going on, and stoving in heads with whatever comes to hand along the way, from hammers to baseball bats to, amusingly, lawnmowers. Gunplay will form a significant part, too.











Kameo: Elements Of Power

■ Format: **360** ■ Developer: **Rare**
■ Publisher: **Microsoft**

Soon it will be time for Rare to actually release the game it has for so long appeared to wish to hide from the world. On the evidence of its showing you'd be forgiven for wondering why it's been so coy: it may all be wrapped up in kid-friendly motifs, but *Kameo* was one of the best-looking 360 games at E3. The problem, perhaps, lies in the fact that, as the titular heroine, you get to assume the form of ten variously powered Elemental Warriors – with all the attendant balancing issues that entails. As a punch-happy weed you're able to momentarily burrow underground (useful for bypassing locked gates) while as a muscular ice beast your spike-laden back can be used as an impalement device: this isn't simply another *Banjo-Kazooie*. The large-scale battles, at least, deliver some spectacle.













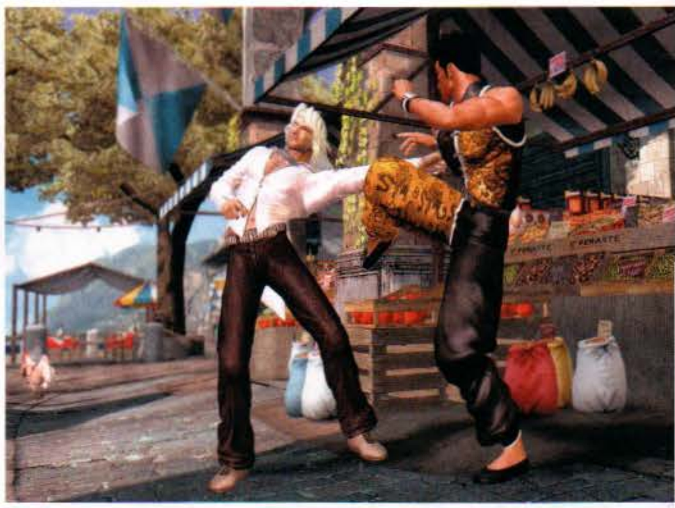
Tom Clancy's Ghost Recon 3

■ Format: **360** ■ Developer: **In-house (Red Storm)**
■ Publisher: **Ubisoft**

When we talked about next-generation game development back in issue **E**134 we discussed the post-production effect of film-like graininess as one graphical option that would no doubt be explored in the future – and here it is in spades in *Ghost Recon 3*, applied in order to give the action a grittier feel. It succeeds in doing so, and stood as one of the most convincing tasters of next-generation visual fidelity at E3. Further adding to the atmosphere are burnt-out bloom effects during explosions and the game's all-round approach to colour – which mostly involves washing it out – leaving the sort of scenes you'd expect to see sourced by a TV news cameraman who's having something of a bad day at the office. In gameplay terms, *Recon 3* is certainly a more complex beast than *Call Of Duty 2*, and its Live play modes will no doubt define much of its popularity.







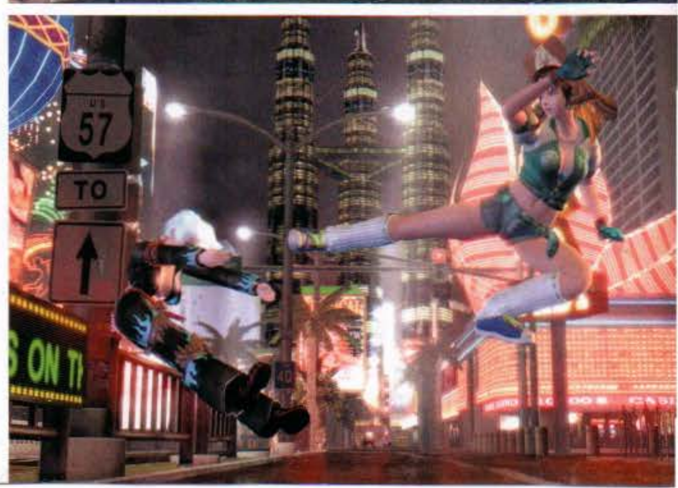




Dead or Alive 4

■ Format: **360** ■ Developer: **Team Ninja**
■ Publisher: **Tecmo**

It's difficult to get too enthusiastic about a new *Dead Or Alive* game because you know more or less what to expect: a handful of new characters (three, in this case – two females, one male), new outfits and moves for the existing roster, new stages spread over even more ambitious terrain and, in the case of new hardware on which to run all this, even finer lines, richer detail and more advanced flesh animation. Despite Team Ninja claiming that *DOA4* is only 15 per cent complete right now, it's looking tremendously polished; presumably the time between now and launch (alongside the 360 hardware) will be spent balancing new movesets, refining all art assets (something all 360 game developers are pledging to do), and populating the environments with incidental details.







Full Auto

■ Format: **360** ■ Developer: **Pseudo Interactive**
■ Publisher: **Sega**

The legacy of *Prince Of Persia: The Sands Of Time* continues to influence other games, but not just those bearing strictly fantasy stylings: Pseudo's car-combat title features an 'Unwreck' meter which can be filled and then used to rewind the action when you run into trouble. Which is often, because *Full Auto*'s as much about loosing off munitions as it is about weaving and wending towards the finish line. Despite appearing fairly advanced, the game is nothing especially spectacular to look at – although it does crank up a gear when your vehicle, those around you, and the environment itself takes damage, deforming in realtime and immediately amending the circumstances. In post-*Burnout* times speed shouldn't really shouldn't be an issue, and *Full Auto* obliges with plenty of pace. All fairly shallow, but early 360 titles will be.











The Outfit

■ Format: **360** ■ Developer: **Relic**
■ Publisher: **THQ**

Shown in video form, *The Outfit* brings a Dirty Dozen tongue-in-cheek angle to WWII gaming. Playing as two of three US archetypes – sniper, bazooka guy or cigar-chomping marine – the thirdperson action game allows you to switch between the two heroes and their squads, adding a tactical element to its overall pick-up-and-playability. Also featuring are in-game action points, earned by capturing strategic locations. These can be used immediately to call in reinforcements – whether an artillery piece, tanks or more troops. Graphically, the look is cartoony rather than gritty, with the 360's power being used to create large-scale, completely destructible environments and dozens of onscreen characters.





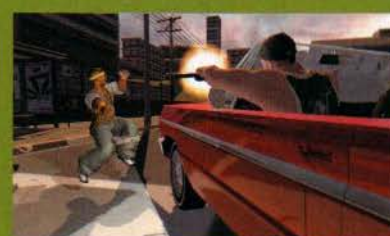






Saint's Row

■ Format: **360** ■ Developer: **Volition**
■ Publisher: **THQ**



If at E3 each year they handed out a gong in a category entitled Most Totally Shameless Rip-Off Of A Proven Hit, 2005's winner by a country mile would've been this game, which so obviously wants to be part of the *Grand Theft Auto* family it hurts. The chief differences so far appear to lie with car-jacking (which takes about twice as long as it does in *GTA*, for some reason), the customisability of your wardrobe (you can wear one trouser leg rolled up with the other one down, for example, in accordance with gangsta chic), and the general all-round fudginess of the action. Still, the lighting/reflection effects are effective, and the game revives *Secret Of Mana*'s ring-style menu system for weapon selection, which can never be a bad thing. No doubt a licensed soundtrack will be put into place before release, and possibly some expensive voice talent, too.









Blazing Angels: Squadrons Of WWII

■ Format: **Xbox** ■ Developer: **In-house (Romania)**
■ Publisher: **Ubisoft**

The tempting tag is that this is just *Brothers In Arms: Take To The Skies*, but in truth this game doesn't share the former's condensed scope and intense atmosphere. A global tour of WWII's most famous aerial battles, *Blazing Angels* puts you in the hotseat of a wide range of period aircraft. However, the loving attention to historical detail is confined to the visual recreation of events: the gameplay is shamelessly arcadey. You'll also have basic control over a couple of wingmen, adding an edge of strategy to the action. Ubisoft has clearly decided that the frustration and disorientation which can sometimes dog dogfights isn't to be part of the experience – button combos can be called upon to repair your plane when it takes heavy damage. Novel colour effects – which reflect the intensity of fighting – add interesting atmospherics.



Amped 3

■ Format: **360** ■ Developer: **In-house**
■ Publisher: **2K Sports**



Was the transformation of *Amped* a commendable risk or an example of yet another title cannibalising the allure of its lucrative peers? This, alongside a hushed reception to the game's visually unremarkable alpha code, was the question that greeted the unveiling of 2K Games' latest. Where once the comparison would have seemed lazy or misinformed, just how *Amped 3* and *SSX 4* will square off is now a more justified concern. It's tongue hasn't slipped entirely into its cheek – play still occupies the slopes of a single, giant mountain, some four times larger than before – but the comic interludes, novel minigames and curious colourful 'trailers' that stream behind the player suggest a substantial deviation from the game's straight-faced roots.







Kingdom Under Fire: Heroes

■ Format: **Xbox** ■ Developer: **Blue Side**
■ Publisher: **Phantagram**

Free from *Crusaders'* troubled development and riding on that game's sucesses, *Heroes* looks to make good on all the promises of its predecessor. Live play – previously shaky twoplayer matches despite the developer's continued wrangling practically until *Crusaders'* gold master – can now feature up to sixplayer battles, or threeplayer coop against a huge AI force. Personal combat will benefit from a wider set of attacks and counters, and troop combat from a waypoint system and the option to pull the camera back to an almost RTS distance. Fans of *Crusaders'* daft characterisation will appreciate the opportunity to explore the backgrounds of the first game's lieutenants, who take centre stage for these prequel battles.







Far Cry Instincts

■ Format: **Xbox** ■ Developer: **In-house (Montreal)**
■ Publisher: **Ubisoft**

This was the second year running that *Instincts* took a prominent place on Ubisoft's E3 stand, and it didn't look out of place. What it lacks in resolution it makes up for with it bright, vivid colours, and the Montreal team has done wonders with its 3D engine, which capably renders the lush tropical locales and comes into its own when using binoculars to zoom in on enemies located far across glistening ravines. Some showgoers still doubted the value of the additional feral mode, but it really does add another dimension to what is otherwise fairly standard firstperson shooter navigation. Only extended play will see how it stacks up when spread out through full sections of the game. Unlike the Xbox conversion of *Half-Life 2* (below), *Instincts* also offers full multiplayer support, something that'll earn it even more attention at launch.





















Half-Life 2

■ Format: **Xbox** ■ Developer: **Valve**
■ Publisher: **TBC**

Half-Life 2 was not designed for Microsoft's Xbox videogame console. We know this because Valve has got it running outside of its native PC space – indeed, the conversion will be out soon – and it looks a bit of a dog. It's not in the textures – they're effective, if only shadows of their previous selves when running on expensive PC kit. It's not in the lighting – in fact, Valve has introduced some specific Xbox-only illumination to make best good use of the hardware. It's simply in the framerate, which chops and chugs like it's about to all but fall over and expire when scenes fill with background complexity and NPC detail. Or at least the beta build's does – can Valve make amends in time for delivery? Such a task may be beyond even Gabe Newell's outfit.







Shadow Of The Colossus

■ Format: **PS2** ■ Developer: **SCEJ**
■ Publisher: **SCEA**

It's almost too soon to want to know, but then you *have* to know. *Shadow Of The Colossus* made a surprise showing on the floor and drew heavy crowds, all clamouring to get their hands on and heads around its sheer enormity. Beginning with a gallop across the countryside, and followed by a cliffside climb familiar to fans of the original, the demo concluded with the scaling of the game's first Colossus. The struggle was as magnificent and terrible as the screenshots would have you believe, with onlookers audibly gasping at every arc and mist of blood that spurted from sword wounds. There were stutters and hiccups, there were flaws and unyielding controls – like seeing a masterwork half finished, it's too soon to want to look, but then you *have* to look.













Onimusha: Dawn Of Dreams

■ Format: **PS2** ■ Developer: **In-house (Production Studio 2)**
■ Publisher: **Capcom**

The next *Onimusha* game proper continues to shy away from working a '4' into the title – if there's a number to be considered, call it the series' second wind. Faster and more responsive, almost all the vestiges of its prerendered origins have been shrugged off, save the sensation that your two characters are attached a little too firmly to the ground.

When battling in tandem, it's possible to swat enemies back and forth between both fighters, or obliterate them in a tagteam special attack – though the resulting cut-scene is a little too leisurely for *DOD*'s newfound pace. A button press switches direct control, though hopefully the AI-controlled partner is still levelling their weapons and movesets with the gratifying, slot-machine rapidity provided by hands-on scrapping.















Okami

■ Format: **PS2** ■ Developer: **Clover Studio**
■ Publisher: **Capcom**

Many attendees' game of the show, *Okami* isn't as unorthodox as it first appears (although it remains a little out there). Its canine hero manoeuvres around the carefully rendered backdrops with the sort of grace you'd expect in an accomplished 3D platformer, gradually gathering pace and bearing the ability to launch itself at foes with a butting attack. The game moves into more experimental territory, however, when you get the opportunity to use a magical brush on the scenery: using R1 and the right analogue stick you can slash across a bamboo gate and it will be destroyed as if cut by a blade, or paint water into a space to allow passage via swimming, or trace the outline of a statue's sword to trigger a special event… and so on and on. Intriguing.









Guitar Hero

■ Format: **PS2** ■ Developer: **Harmonix**
■ Publisher: **RedOctane**

To any long-time Konami aficionado, it's neither the most original concept nor direction – but just four months into development, *Guitar Hero* is shaping up as one of the best-executed and most accessible music games the *Freaks* line never produced. With Harmonix lending its mastery of charting button patterns that feel like music-making, RedOctane assembling a solid and responsive guitar peripheral, and an all-star line-up of classic rock'n'roll reworks and legendary guitar makers lending their sponsorship, *Guitar Hero* is aiming straight at the heart of the western populace and the rockstar mythology. Never mind air guitar; pretending to be Megadeth or Hendrix has never felt this perfect. *Guitar Hero* was one of E3's undeniable hidden gems.



Soul Calibur III

■ Format: **PS2** ■ Developer: **In-house**
■ Publisher: **Namco**

Hiroaki Yotoriyama is convinced that, with *Soul Calibur III*, his team is making the best fighting game ever. Ask what that means his Namco colleagues are creating with the next *Tekken* and he pauses, smiles, then says: "They're making the best ever unarmed combat game; we're making the best ever combat game featuring weapons." Bar any next-generation examples, his is probably the best-looking, with some of the richest backgrounds seen on PS2 – and character animation is similarly effective. The spin this time is customisation, allowing you to kit warriors out as you wish, from their outfits to the blades with with they slash their opponents. Yotoriyama is convinced this will give part three a wider audience, but it seems well equipped to gratify fans of the series, too.







Urban Reign

■ Format: **PS2** ■ Developer: **In-house**
■ Publisher: **Namco**



After seeing the competition, it looks like the beat 'em up renaissance is fast becoming a two-horse race between Rockstar's *The Warriors*, and this *Tekken 5*-powered offering from Namco. Demonstrating a better understanding of its genre than most, *Reign* is a game that punishes the button-masher and rewards the more committed gamer with a wide range of electrifying combos and evasions. Improvised weapons are swung in trajectories more reminiscent of *Soul Calibur* than *Dynamite Cop*, with multiple targets meeting extravagant *Def Jam*-style manoeuvres that bring a convincing physics system into play. The typically high standard of the in-house design makes this a tantalising contender for the underground crown.

Metal Gear Acid 2

■ Format: **PSP** ■ Developer: **Kojima Productions** ■ Publisher: **Konami**



One of Konami's most surprising E3 announcements was neither software nor hardware-related, but concerned the restructuring of its KCET West studio as Kojima Productions – a creative environment intended to release the auteur designer from the last vestiges of corporate control.

In addition to *MGS4* and the special edition of *MGS3*, the studio will be producing a follow-up to its baroque PSP card action game. Now boasting a sharper, cel-shaded look more in keeping with Masao Tsubasa's artwork and some truly fabulous explosions, the design intent is to create a faster-paced experience in both game speed and structure. *Acid 2*'s more relaxed development schedule should also see fewer of the flaws in scripting and control that resulted from its predecessor's rushed production.





Sly 3: Honour Among Thieves

■ Format: **PS2** ■ Developer: **Sucker Punch**
■ Publisher: **SCEA**

Sly 3 surprised fans of the series, and gamers in general, with the announcement that the '3' was not merely a sequential indicator, but also a hint to the dimensions within. Among the game's new features are a red-blue renderer that allows some early levels to be viewed in full 3D, and later levels that have the option unlocked after completion as a bonus. Apart from the ridiculous sight of a crowd of onlookers all wearing identical cardboard cat-burglar glasses, on the show floor at least, the effect is an interesting way to platform. The added dimension aided sewer jumps and dogfighting alike, with the renderer handling depth perception calculations normally required of the player. Other flatter new features include new minigames and additional competitive twoplayer scenarios.





Genji: Dawn of the Samurai

■ Format: **PS2** ■ Developer: **Game Republic**
■ Publisher: **SCEE**

The first game from Yoshiki Okamoto's Game Republic studio combines a rhythm-action approach to swordsmanship with the array of demonic warriors and fetishistic bosses that seem to have become de rigueur in samurai games. Play is split between the acrobatic hero Genkuro Yoshitsune and his lumbering giant sidekick Benkei, and in the E3 demo at least, action was interspersed with multiple short, enigmatic cut-scenes. But it's the Mind's Eye attack which seems to be the main focus of the game. Correctly pulled off, it enables you to cut down whole squads in a single flowing move, whereas failure to complete means you'll have to laboriously fight them off using the less satisfying traditional controls.









Buzz! The Music Quiz

■ Format: **PS2** ■ Developer: **Relentless**
■ Publisher: **SCEE**



From the same Brighton-based studio that produced *DJ: Decks & FX* comes this rather more ambitious experience – a gameshow in which up to four players take part in a rapid-fire music quiz. Following the success of its *Singstar* series, SCEE will be releasing a dedicated peripheral for the game in the shape of a controller featuring five buttons – a main red option supplemented by variously coloured alternatives underneath for A, B, C or D-type responses. The E3 demo showed off various play modes and was, as you'd expect, supremely polished, with both simple text-based questions and others featuring proper music. Clearly Sony expects *Buzz!* to clean up at Christmas: it'll be interesting to see how long its roster of 5,000 questions will last.

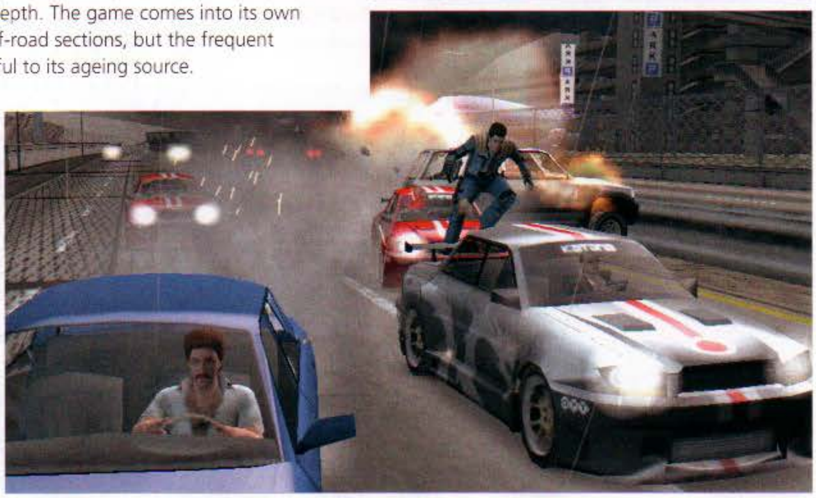




Pursuit Force

■ Format: **PSP** ■ Developer: **Big Big Studios**
■ Publisher: **SCEE**

There probably haven't been enough games willing or able to run with the concept once popularised by Taito's *Chase HQ* series, so getting to see what Big Big is realising with *Pursuit Force* was heartening – especially at an event lacking in truly big new PSP titles. Taking thematic cues from the likes of Starsky & Hutch and Charlie's Angels, the game is arcade-styled through and through, head-on collisions simply slowing you down a little as the incoming vehicle is rammed into submission, but the ability to clamber from car to car (essential when your current mode of transport is about to explode) delivers at least a helping of depth. The game comes into its own when leaving highways for off-road sections, but the frequent gunplay ensures that it's faithful to its ageing source.







GripShift

■ Format: **PSP** ■ Developer: **Sidhe Interactiv**
■ Publisher: **Sony Online Entertainment**



Sidhe Interactive's previous rugby titles have chiefly been 'world famous in New Zealand', to borrow a local idiom. However, its new PSP racing platformer looks likely to be a far more popular export. Created by ex-pat Andy Satterthwaite of *Wipeout 2097* and *Quantum Redshift* fame, and taking its vertiginous cues from Geoff Crammond's *Stunt Car Racer*, *GripShift* demonstrates the fractured rollercoaster courses and sense of speed that union would suggest. Handling, both roadside and airborne, seems to have benefitted from the attention it needs to ensure that losing contact with the track – a regular occurrence as you try to leapfrog places in a nitro-boosted slalom – doesn't prove too frustrating. An editor will also allow players to create their own suspended Scalextric sets.

Ratchet: Deadlocked

■ Format: **PS2** ■ Developer: **Insomniac**
■ Publisher: **Sony**



Despite taking a rather cynical turn towards a more mature yet reliably adolescent look, it's difficult to begrudge the *Ratchet & Clank* series' continued pursuit of new avenues and novel twists. The set-up for its fourth episode will be familiar to fans of The Running Man, with Ratchet captured and plunged into a brutal game show – fitted with a collar that will explode if he doesn't play along. An arena-based singleplayer campaign with an emphasis on vehicle combat and territorial conquest suggests the game's true focus, though – collaborative multiplayer. The weapon system has been overhauled, this time offering a more flexible customisation model. But in lieu of a more comprehensive playtest, we can only hope such changes are for the better.









Infected

■ Format: **PSP** ■ Developer: **Planet Moon**
■ Publisher: **Majesco**

The ear-shattering black metal that Majesco pumped in to the *Infected* demo area may have been a head-pounding nuisance in any other circumstance, but as an accompaniment to the game it was ideal. *Infected* is immediately raucous, intense, sick, and an affront to all senses – and all the better for it.

Though just showcasing the multiplayer portion, Planet Moon's commitment to both full avatar customisation and levels of gore that would do H G Lewis proud was in full display. Deathmatch levels remain well stocked with bystander undead to be corralled, pummelled, and then dismissed with a shot from the viral gun that results in a chain reaction of torrents of blood and – yes, we'll say it – meaty chunks.









Burnout Legends

■ Format: **PSP** ■ Developer: **Criterion**
■ Publisher: **EA**

Burnout Legends is a remix album, compiling tracks and car models from all three current console versions, reviving old modes like Pursuit, and allowing the player to mix and match their favourites of all three. It's also a little bit Pokémon, giving each player a random fifth of all available cars, and requiring multiplay to unlock the remaining 20. Functionally identical to its older brothers, and technically very near identical, there are only barely perceptible concessions made to its graphical fidelity, and the necessary hair-trigger steering sensitivity has been tweaked for smaller analogue control. Played even in its incomplete state, every bit of speed and mayhem is there, and it's well on its way to being every bit as enjoyable as the originals.



The Con

■ Format: **PSP** ■ Developer: **Think And Feel**
■ Publisher: **SCEA**



The feature that promises to be the most interesting thing about *The Con* is the feature that was least noticeable at E3. Beyond the standard twoplayer brawling lies a monetary system that revolves around the player's ability to bet on, and throw, their own fights for profit. Shoulder buttons modify the punches you throw for a showier effect – jabs that hit lightly but with a staged reaction from your opponent, for instance – in an effort to swing the odds more in your favour. While the complexities of the system weren't immediately apparent, nor the feature to map your own face to your fighter, the fighting system was tangibly less frenzied and more premeditative than your average beat 'em up. Coupled with the over-the-shoulder perspective, it recalls *Punch Out* in both vantage point and pacing.

Coded Arms

■ Format: **PSP** ■ Developer: **KCET**
■ Publisher: **Konami**



Konami hits all the right buttons with its cyber-themed firstperson shooter: a diverse (if predictable) arsenal, upgradeable armour and power-ups that carry over into the game's multiplayer mode, impressively expansive and gorgeously lit environments, and a suitably workable and fully customisable single-analogue control scheme.

And yet there's a crucially compelling hook that's still missing from the game. Even after repeated playtests hoping to ferret out some unforeseen nook that would shed new light, the world felt utterly devoid of character. Despite being fully populated with enemy software 'bugs' and security system 'bots', there is no discernable pacing or flow to the level structure. With any luck, the multiplayer modes will provide the human touch necessary to breathe a spark of life into the gameplay.



Daxter

■ Format: **PSP** ■ Developer: **Ready At Dawn**
■ Publisher: **SCEA**

Daxter, like *Jak II*, is intimately bound with its hardware, and, like *Jak II*, its developers seem infinitely capable with that hardware. The storyline sees Daxter taking an exterminator assignment and, armed with a fly swatter and a multipurpose tool not too dissimilar from FLUDD, exploring Haven City from his own perspective, eliminating an insect infestation as he goes. What's shocking about playing *Daxter* at this stage in its development is that it feels – and essentially is – code complete, with only the niggling details of level creation left to tackle. Pair this technical expertise with the usual ultra-expressive animation, wi-fi multiplayer, and *Jak X* connectivity, and *Daxter* stands a chance of becoming the first truly blockbuster PSP title.















Zelda: Twilight Princess

■ Format: **GC** ■ Developer: **In-house**
■ Publisher: **Nintendo**

It's hard to be truly shocked by *Twilight Princess*'s oddities, not when *Zelda* games are often reliably shocking in their own wildly different styles. Still, it's just as hard to not feel a mixture of intrigue and hesitation at Link's role as a cowboy (feisty horseback battling included), or his ability to transform into a wolf, complete with a beautifully bizarre passenger straddling his back. And the game's mooted main stage – rolling plains that stretch on in as breathtaking and featureless a manner as *Wind Waker*'s ocean – is cause for as much excitement as concern. But, in true Zelda style, *Twilight Princess* remains a defiantly unknown quantity, meaning it's too early to judge whether the realism lobbyists should have been careful about what they wished for.











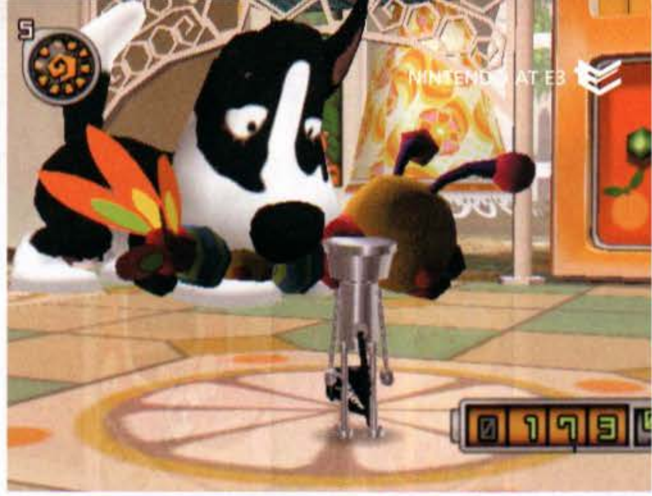


Chibi Robo

■ Format: **GC**
■ Developer: **Skip** ■ Publisher: **Bandai**

When developer Skip's tiny household-assistant automaton first came on to the scene he was languishing in a cumbersome and indirect point-and-click interface that threatened to doom his adventures. It was then that Nintendo's Miyamoto stepped in to rescue the troubled robo, offering a firstparty collaboration that would bring the game forward from cursor control to a far more engaging thirdperson adventure.

Chibi's sole purpose is to assist his host family in its day-to-day operations, and to do so in as energy-efficient a manner as possible – using too much power means dropping everything for a fast dash to the nearest socket for a refill. *Chibi Robo* has certainly benefited from its new development partner, and now has all the cultish trappings to make it the next GameCube sleeper hit.







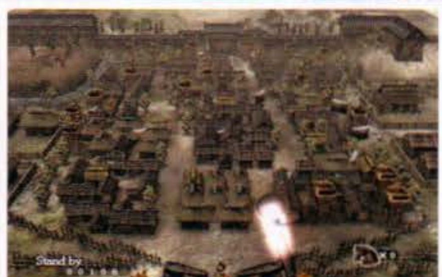


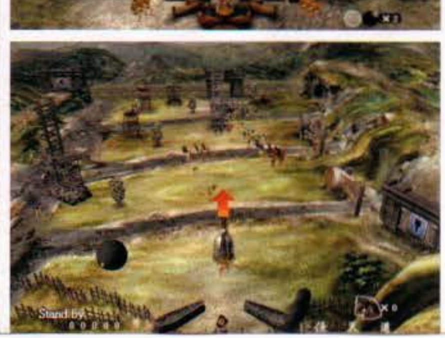












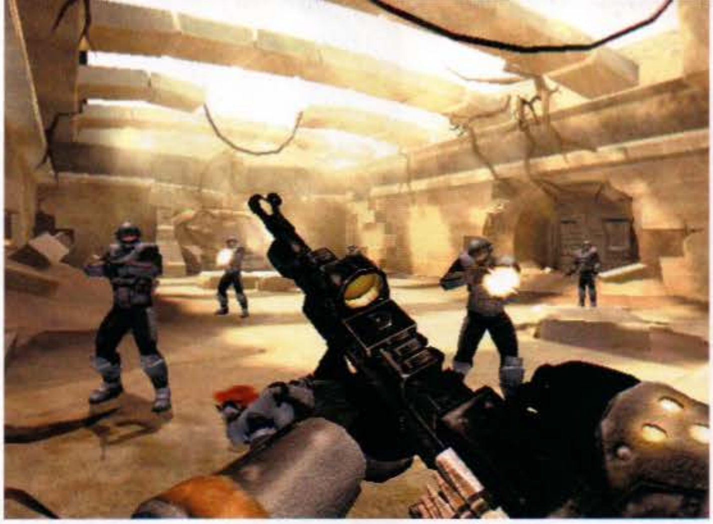
Yoot Saito's Odama

■ Format: **GC**
■ Developer: **Vivarium** ■ Publisher: **Nintendo**

Coming from the brain behind Dreamcast's *Seaman*, it's little surprise that since *Odama's* unveiling at E3 2004, the game has had speech recognition added to it. Best described as a historic Japanese military pinball game, the Odama of the title is a large ball that's controlled by tilting the ground with the left analogue stick or the two flippers. The ball is then manipulated to knock over enemy troops, with the ultimate goal being to get your troops through the enemy's gate carrying a large bell – this being the win condition. They can only be directed by shouting commands such as 'Right', 'Left', 'Go Back' and 'More troops' into the bundled microphone.

It probably wasn't the best game to demo on the noisy E3 2005 showfloor, but it's certainly worth looking out for.






Geist

■ Format: **GC** ■ Developer: **n-Space**
■ Publisher: **Nintendo**

Of all the challenges facing n-Space, the one that is perhaps most pressing is its ability to communicate to the world that *Geist* is not a firstperson shooter. *Metroid Prime* had it easy by comparison, since even if it was to be judged purely on its prettiness and combat, it could hold its own. *Geist*, as another firstperson adventure, is overwhelmingly lacklustre in both departments. These factors were never supposed to be the core of the game, of course, and it was a relief to get a chance to see the game's central 'possession' mechanic in action – becoming at one with boxes of explosives and conveniently located dogs in order to solve puzzles and cause chaos. If the balance stays firmly on the possession, then *Geist* could still make a name for itself.







Battalion Wars

■ Format: **GC** ■ Developer: **Kuju**
■ Publisher: **Nintendo**

The biggest change from last year for this *Advance Wars*-inspired action wargame was that this year people were braced for it. Last year the game's reception was dominated by the shock caused by the decision to abandon *Advance Wars'* cerebral strategies in favour of some dumb gunplay. This year there were fewer surprises. Although the name has been changed to distance the game from its *AW* heritage, the visual style – rather confusingly – has taken a step towards the heavily stylised cartoons of Intelligent Systems' games. It's not a perfect fit, even with the exaggerated exuberance of the game's characters and soldiers. That running and gunning, however, is solidifying into a satisfying and punchy experience, although Kuju still has to prove it can match that quality in its mission designs.





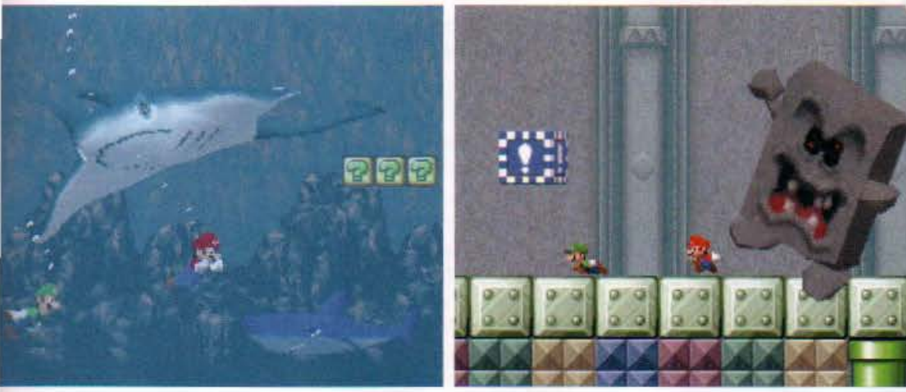

New Super Mario Bros

■ Format: **DS** ■ Developer: **In-house**
■ Publisher: **Nintendo**

It's been nearly 15 years since the last proper 2D Mario game. And all eyes are now avidly focused on the aptly titled *New Super Mario Bros* as a return to pure, nostalgia-laden days gone by. Fortunately, the E3 demo was mechanically, if not stylistically, as sound as its ancestors. In addition to the singleplayer levels, there was a surprisingly well-balanced and challenging versus footrace between Mario and Luigi through both upper and underworlds – with all of the classical perils of each – also on display. The mode's hook was a set of checkpoints and blue blocks that warp the leading brother back to the one behind, wrenching your lead from you just an arm's length from the goal. Though lacking the series' traditional graphical flair, the demo was an impressive rough sketch.







Animal Crossing DS

■ Format: **DS** ■ Developer: **In-house**
■ Publisher: **Nintendo**

A lynchpin in Nintendo's official online service unveiling, *Animal Crossing*'s demo units showed its major development: three people can now congregate and interact in the same village at once. Along with the expected stylus-based painting and submenu manipulation, a number of commands and controls have been enhanced by the touchscreen, allowing users to move, shake trees and pick up items through touch. The DS version has also shaken off its single-screen layout in lieu of smooth scrolling across a spherical map, giving the world a more cohesive, B-612-planetoid feel. It's worrisome, but largely inevitable, especially with the expanded community features, that we'll be sucked in all over again.





Metroid Prime: Hunters

■ Format: **DS** ■ Developer: **In-house**
■ Publisher: **Nintendo**



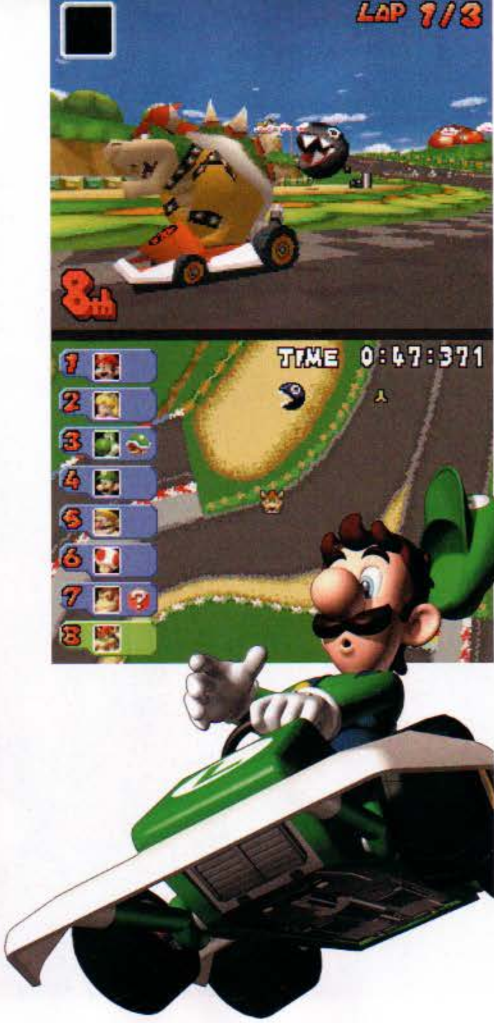
What a difference a year makes. At E3 2004, much of the DS's credibility as a gaming platform was resting on *Metroid Prime: Hunters*. Just a year later, and while it's still an appealing prospect, it's now only one of many. There is still no word, though, on the singleplayer game which, combined with rumours of a new 2D DS *Metroid*, means many are starting to suspect that there won't be much adventuring meat on *Hunter's* deathmatch bones. Also absent is any confirmation of online play. However, the unveiling of some new playable characters, with new secondary abilities such as a spiked, all-terrain morph ball, and some new (but at the same time very familiar) weapons has bolstered the smooth solidity of the gunplay.

Scratch! Viewtiful Joe DS

■ Format: **DS** ■ Developer: **Clover Studio**
■ Publisher: **Capcom**



Although the DS has already established a library of inventive games which rely on its new input methods, it's all too easy to forget that it has some capable hardware under its hood. But this is a perception that even the briefest moment with *Viewtiful Joe* will shatter: it's got brains and innovative puzzles beyond its surface beauty. One particularly notable touch is the new screensplitting feature that drags the top half of the bottom screen toward you, allowing Joe to leap into a section of the world some 20 feet away and land back beyond an obstacle that previously challenged him. With all this and the same vivacious ultraviolence that characterised the former games, this should be the sort of action game that the DS has so far lacked.





Mario Kart DS

■ Format: **DS** ■ Developer: **In-house**
■ Publisher: **Nintendo**

For a game that has been known about for months now, *Mario Kart DS* came perilously close to stealing the thunder at Nintendo's E3 show. The eightplayer local wireless mode, which had been unveiled at the DS's European launch, would have been enough to draw the crowds on its own, but the chance to personally inspect the game's online capabilities produced some of the sweatiest queues of the show. The wait, however, was well worth it. The only obvious disappointment is the limitation of online races to four players. Otherwise, the DS version shows no signs of tinkering with the vibrant worlds, tight handling and vicious competition that are the hallmarks of the series. The online play – albeit under tightly controlled circumstances – was hearteningly smooth and solid.



Castlevania: Dawn Of Sorrow

■ Format: **DS** ■ Developer: **In-house**
■ Publisher: **Konami**

With each new chapter in producer Igarashi's 2D *Castlevania* line-up, he strikes that much further toward recreating the magic that made *Symphony Of The Night* one of the defining titles of the platforming genre. *Aria Of Sorrow* was nearly there, and with *Dawn* being *Aria*'s direct sequel, it again stands poised to take the title. It feels instantly familiar, leaving players more time to take in the finer details and polish the upgraded hardware provides, down to the mist of Soma's breath in the snow-flecked exteriors. Igarashi is also working to create a wi-fi community – both to trade souls and planned trading of customised levels for competitive speed runs.



Mario & Luigi 2

■ Format: **DS** ■ Developer: **Alphadream**
■ Publisher: **Nintendo**



Every developer sees something different when they look at the DS: microphone, touchscreen, wireless. But Alphadream looked at the DS and saw something different again: four whole face buttons. Taking the switchback gameplay of *Superstar Saga* to its extreme, the sequel gives you control over four characters at once – Mario, Luigi and their baby counterparts – bouncing them from one screen to the other as they solve problems or launch super attacks. The core mechanics are unchanged, with the active, turn-based battles of the *Mario RPG* tradition interwoven with platform and puzzle elements. Even better, the team has streamlined *Saga's* occasionally awkward controls, while quadrupling the family's possible permutations.

Pokémon XD: Gale Of Darkness

■ Format: **GC** ■ Developer: **Genius Sonority** ■ Publisher: **Nintendo**



The XD stands for 'extra dimension', but as with its work on *Pokémon Colloseum*, the extra dimension Genius Sonority brings to the Pokémon universe is a conviction that grown-ups like things to be bland. Nintendo seems equally determined to focus attention on *Gale Of Darkness'* maturity, which seems to translate as drab environments, charmless characters and the inclusion of *Colloseum's* Shadow Pokémon. At this stage there's little to suggest the game will preserve the densely detailed gameplay and vibrant visual style that made the handheld versions so worthy of their massive success. However, *Colossseum's* strong sales have given *Genius Sonority* a good deal of momentum, and *XD* could still surprise.



Gunstar Super Heroes

■ Format: **GBA** ■ Developer: **Treasure**
■ Publisher: **Sega**

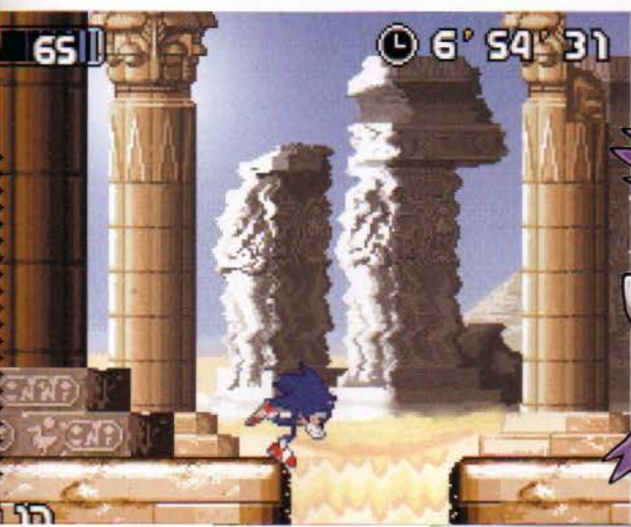
Perhaps second only to *Kid Icarus* in the 'most-clamoured-for-sequel' stakes, *Gunstar Heroes* remains one of many gamers' fondest memories. Most had given up hope, but Treasure's recent resurgence on the GBA gives every reason for celebration. *Gunstar Super Heroes* is as effusively creative as you would expect from Treasure, with the running, gunning, sliding and crunching as solid as ever and the levels pulsing with colour and ingenuity. The biggest fear – that the game would suffer as badly from slowdown as the *Guardian Heroes* update did – also seems unfounded. If the game lives up to the promise of the demo, then a large number of Treasure fans will have to come up with something new to wish for when they blow out the candles on their birthday cakes.



Sonic Rush

■ Format: **DS** ■ Developer: **In-house (Sonic Team)**
■ Publisher: **Sega**

After several incarnations leading *Sonic* in exploratory directions, *Rush* intends to bring the series back to where it all began by offering the thing its fans are desperate for: more speed. Everything about the demo screams classic Green Hill, only twice as tall, twice as fast, and with occasional 3D corkscrew and inter-screen back-and-forth travel to provide a new way of experiencing an old world. Clever camerawork uses the new portrait configuration to keep Sonic in ideal positions for fully soaking in his surroundings, but no touchscreen elements are planned beyond unlockable minigames. The mysterious new character – this time Blaze the Cat – has been unveiled through artwork, but her abilities are yet to be revealed.





Phoenix Wright: Ace Attorney

■ Format: **DS** ■ Developer: **In-house**
■ Publisher: **Capcom**



Representing the fourth iteration of the popular *Gyakuten Saiban* (*Comeback Courtroom*) series, *Ace Attorney* is set to become the first of Capcom's melodramatic courtroom battlers developed both for the DS and western audiences. Derived from the series' third instalment, it alternates between detective and courtroom sequences, all rendered in firstperson anime. How fans will react to the transition of its story from Japan to the US, however, remains to be seen. The game's use of touchscreen isn't quite as radical as we'd hoped, simplifying the interface rather than diversifying the game. It does, however, streamline its characteristic trials with an always-on inventory.







Prey

■ Format: **Next-gen, PC** ■ Dev: **3D Realms/Human Head**
■ Publisher: **2K Games**

First announced in 1997 and long since forgotten by most PC gamers, *Prey* was one of E3's genuine surprises – and a weirdly appealing one at that. Despite being a firstperson shooter with a science-fiction premise, the game somehow managed to appear both imaginative and innovative. Making use of a tweaked version of the Doom 3 engine, it is a dark game in both presentation and tone, and few who walked away from the private demo booth will forget it in a hurry. Alien weapons and portals into otherworldly realms distinguish the action, but it's also the ability to indulge in out-of-body experiences and traverse walkways which literally turn the gameworld on its head that make *Prey* something to watch. And then there are the children with their hollow, glowing eyes…









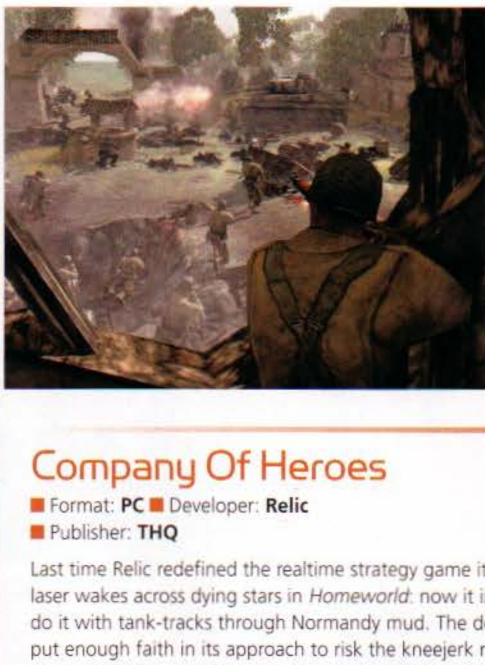
Enemy Territory: Quake Wars

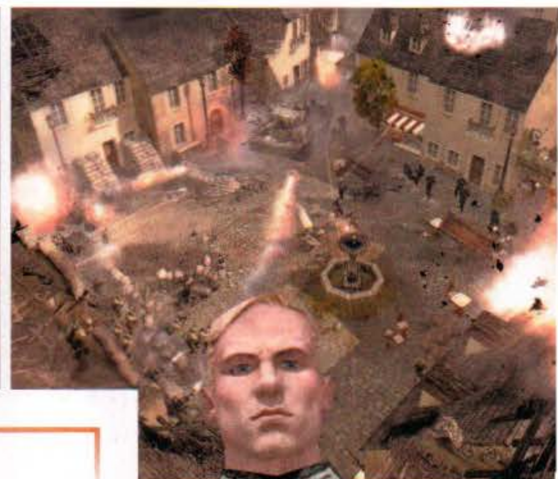
■ Format: **PC** ■ Developer: **Splash Damage**
■ Publisher: **Activision**

A welcome show surprise was that London's Splash Damage – mod-maker turned dev house after its successful *Wolfenstein: Enemy Territory* team-based shooter – is now working its magic on *Quake*'s Strogg cycle. Set during the Strogg's invasion of Earth (preceding *Quake II*), both USMC and Strogg forces will be playable, with different classes, vehicles and weapons available to human and biomechanical players. The introduction of vehicles, as well as objectives that flow across the war zones, has seen *Quake Wars* elevated to a standalone commercial title, unlike *Wolfenstein*'s free download. Activision clearly feels it has a *Battlefield* in the making, and the chance to play out id's war of the worlds on a grand scale is certainly appealing.











Company Of Heroes

■ Format: **PC** ■ Developer: **Relic**
■ Publisher: **THQ**

Last time Relic redefined the realtime strategy game it was with laser wakes across dying stars in *Homeworld*: now it intends to do it with tank-tracks through Normandy mud. The developer has put enough faith in its approach to risk the kneejerk reaction that another WWII squad-based strategy game elicits – and in action, *COH* is nothing like another WWII strategy game. Few games have communicated the sheer terrifying force of every heavy machine-gun round, grenade impact, tank shell and bomb blast so well: the rupturing terrain and debris physics have a marked effect on strategy, but it's the way the devastation punches through not just in-game walls, but the RTS's typically distant third wall, that leaves the strongest impression.







Sid Meier's Civilization IV

■ Format: **PC** ■ Developer: **Firaxis**
■ Publisher: **2K Games**

Once upon a time, not so very long ago in fact, a strategy game that 'went 3D' was heralded and honoured for its bravery and innovation. This is no longer the case, so *Civ IV* had better have something to impress us upon release, because at the moment 'going 3D' isn't doing it many favours. Yes, you can rotate the map around, but why bother? The oversized models that represent your armies are unnervingly young-looking and clutter the interface. Compare this to the sophisticated menu systems and it's a confusing message Meier is sending out.

It's still recognisably *Civ*, but many of the 'improvements' are unlikely to win over new, younger fans, and for an older generation they're a little alienating. As ever, of course, it's hard to make a full assessment based on a barely audible E3 presentation.









FEAR

■ Format: **PC** ■ Developer: **Monolith**
■ Publisher: **Vivendi**



A confined demo and a confined demo booth do *FEAR* little justice, a positive appraisal of its atmosphere considering the FPS, by nature, is well-suited to the quick E3 sell. Equally, where the sense of dread in most shooters comes from rationing out your health until the next checkpoint, *FEAR* broods spectacularly, teasing out blink-and-you'll-miss-it shocks between the equally unnerving firefights. Enemies play considerably more believable games than typical flee-pause-charge behaviour, goading you into breaking cover before returning fire, then diving behind any level feature that hasn't disintegrated in the fray. If Monolith can keep up this bad-cop, worse-cop barrage of intensity throughout the game, *FEAR* will be the highlight of its bombastic output to date.







Black & White 2

■ Format: **PC** ■ Developer: **Lionhead**
■ Publisher: **EA**

With every glimpse of Molyneux and the Millars' sequel comes continued proof that it's layering another raft of quaint invention on to the bold foundations. As ever, the brief is to create an emergent experience driven by novel ideas, enacted by a population of miniature ideas men, women and children exploring their cutting-edge AI. Many tweaks have been implemented, from the purposefully decreased number of available creatures and spells to the increased shades of grey that allegedly bridge the player's choice of behaviour. The tribute system looks set to offer some much-needed reward for your overall playing style, opening up new weaponry, constructions and creature enhancements, though the question remains as to whether the game can work its many tricks into a more engrossing whole.





Tabula Rasa

■ Format: **PC** ■ Developer: **Destination Games** ■ Publisher: **NCsoft**



An ominous silence had fallen over the development of Richard Garriott and company's iconoclastic MMORPG after E3 2004, and earlier this year an address from Garriott on the web told fans to expect changes (the site's transformation from blue New Age to black military stencils suggesting they would be major). Sure enough, the *Tabula Rasa* of E3 2005 has shed the bright palette, martial arts and chi-focused songweapons for mud, fire and frontline combat: while players still face the same biomechanical foe, it's now firstperson shootouts rather than wild magic and choreographed grappling. The redesign is an internal choice, so there's every chance that the new game will be better for it – but it's no longer something we haven't seen before.

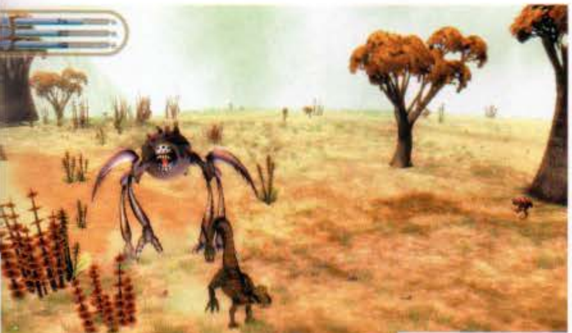
Rise Of Nations: Rise Of Legends

■ Format: **PC** ■ Developer: **Big Huge Games**
■ Publisher: **Microsoft**

Though many predicted the next project from Brian Reynolds' Big Huge Games studio would be a direct sequel to *Rise Of Nations* – a brass pocketwatch splash webpage not necessarily being a giveaway to its true nature – even those expecting more were taken aback by *Legends'* wondrous machines and impossible creatures. A truly fantastic fantasy title, it continues the themes of *Nations* in a world where magic and industry have gone beyond uneasy coexistence into full-scale war. The developer hopes to use the leeway of this fantasy setting to inspire new directions for the strategy game: it may also provide a more affectingly human experience than a straight historical power-play, as Reynolds' previous *Alpha Centauri* demonstrated with its mix of hard sci-fi and social commentary.







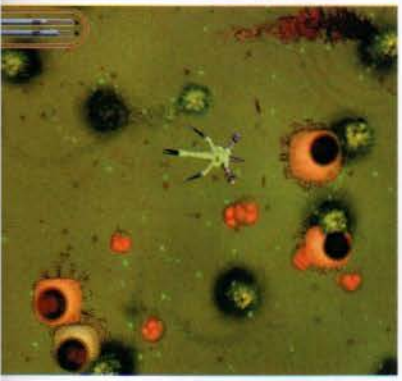




Spore

■ Format: **PC** ■ Developer: **Maxis**
■ Publisher: **EA**

Despite showing essentially the same demo given to GDC attendees in March, Will Wright's *SimEverything* magnum opus remains every bit as mindbogglingly mesmerising for each repeated view. *Spore* promises to take the player through a number of game styles through its powers of ten evolution – conjuring *Pac-Man, Diablo, SimCity, Civilization* and outward to an intergalactic game of terraforming, colonising and warfare. Every in-game asset is user-created and modifiable using a built-in modeling toolset, and is massively online in a non-traditional instanced sense where the peaceful race of herbivores you create might end up the indigenous food source for another player's bloodthirsty creatures light-years away. Though higher-level structure is still yet to be fully developed, *Spore* is proving itself quite possibly the most attainably ambitious title in game history.





Dungeons & Dragons Online: Stormreach

■ Format: **PC** ■ Developer: **Turbine**
■ Publisher: **Atari**



Dungeons & Dragons finally fails its saving throw against going massively multiplayer, although creator Turbine has chosen to create a *PSO*-style 'instanced' world, leaving the massive part of the equation behind once your party hits the wilds. Current D&D campaign universe Eberron provides the backdrop, which may disappoint those hoping to hike through the Forgotten Realms. In fact, it's possible to cut out hiking entirely, with players able to start their quest directly after leaving the city of Stormreach. Branching objectives mid-mission, non-confrontational options and advisory dungeon master text are also intended to enliven the whack-a-mole +1 MMO grind.









Serious Sam 2

■ Format: **PC, Xbox** ■ Developer: **Croteam**
■ Publisher: **2K Games**

If anything, this FPS is even less serious than the original, and at a time when most developers aiming to top the believability of *Half-Life 2*'s world are set to fail, maybe that's a good thing. With a new and apparently robust physics system in place, Croteam has seen fit to throw in vehicles – including, naturally, a flying saucer equipped with laser cannons – but the new weapons were the aspects being played up at E3. Dual-wielding is a natural progression; of more surprise was a new chainsaw that works as viciously as you'd expect from the team that came up with headless humans with bombs for hands as enemies. In terms of setting it's all over the place, running the gauntlet from Chinatown levels to greener areas somewhat reminiscent of *Far Cry* – and it's all filled with weird.



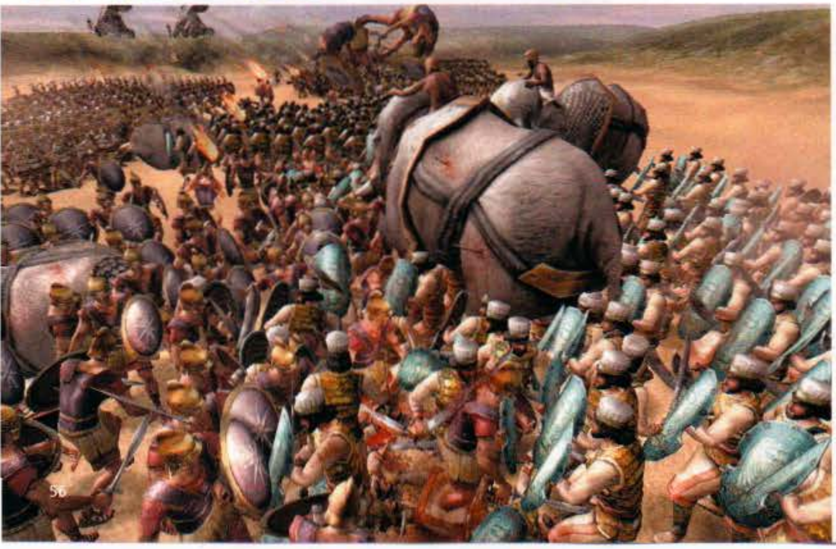
Rise & Fall: Civilisations At War

■ Format: **PC** ■ Developer: **Stainless Steel Studios**
■ Publisher: **Midway**

Marking an impressive debut into PC gaming, Midway not only showed off its ace card, *UT 2007*, but also revealed this little number. Harking from *Empire Earth* developer Stainless Steel, at first sight it bears more than a little resemblance to the Creative Assembly games: classic setting, epic battles, formations as the core units...

There's much more to *Rise & Fall* than the normal 'me too' game, though. Intriguingly, the economic city building side of the game is handled in the same engine as the battlefield tactics, for seamless play, and sea battles are much better developed (the sight of a Greek galley performing a boarding action is particularly thrilling). This is all just a big teaser for the real sting, though: once battle has commenced you can sweep down to a tight thirdperson view of your hero.







Imperator

■ Format: **PC** ■ Developer: **In-house**
■ Publisher: **Mythic Entertainment**



***The Dark Age Of Camelot* creator's alternative-future title continues to intrigue both thematically and visually, although much of what was shown at E3 came with the caveat of being subject to change. *Imperator's* future chronicles two civilisations: a Roman empire that has long dominated the planet and now sweeps spaceward, and the Mayans, who abandoned Earth for space long before and have returned even more savage. Players will fight for Rome as one of four combative classes, and the battle system is intended to encourage cooperative tactics, with frontline legionaries opening weaknesses for ranged strikers to exploit. The proof of all this promise is still at least a year away, but then futuristic Rome wasn't built in a day.**





Age of Conan: Hyborian Adventures

■ Format: **PC** ■ Developer: **In-house**
■ Publisher: **Funcom**

The problem with games as ambitious as *Conan* is that you keep waiting for it to let you down. On this showing, however, Funcom is still on course to deliver everything it has promised. The most enticing aspect of this epic MMO remains its realtime active combat, and the system devised to control it. The screen is divided into six sections, which can be clicked to target specific areas of your enemy and strung together into fluid and dramatic combos. This proves just as applicable to ranged combat, where a segmented reticule appears over your distant enemy, allowing the same kind of strategic attacks. Also striking are the naturalistic details of the vast world that's been created, from the thick coldness of the mud to the soaring freshness of the sky.





The Witcher

■ Format: **PC** ■ Developer: **CD Projekt**
■ Publisher: **TBA**

Based on the dark fantasy world of Polish writer Andrzej Sapkowski, work on the singleplayer action-RPG *The Witcher* continues apace. Features such as animation captured from experts in medieval swordplay, use of RenderWare physics and beautiful weather effects as well as an innovative combat system mean it's shaping up to highlight the talent of eastern European developers. Using BioWare's Aurora engine, the 42-strong team has recently added a producer from Gas Powered Games (*Dungeon Siege*) to ensure its ambitious plans are realised – not least a non-linear structure befitting its decidedly adult moralities and themes. Bloodsoaked and bleak, it looks to be a wake-up call for mainstream RPGs.









Half-Life 2: The Lost Coast

■ Format: **PC** ■ Developer: **In-house**
■ Publisher: **Valve**



In the light of the Unreal Engine 3, *Prey's* tweaked *Doom*-look and the impressive visuals of *FEAR*, *The Lost Coast* could be a shot in the ego contest between the major PC developers – a little 'anything they can do' style.

That's unfair, though, as the free add-on to *Half-Life 2* – which will be released via a patch at some point in the summer – is coming sooner than any of these and shows off what a high-end graphics card can really do with high dynamic range lighting. Prosaically, this simply means a greater range of colours between deepest shadow and brightest highlights, but this extra range in gamut of displayed colours really does make a difference, and makes Valve's Source engine shine. Literally.









Call Of Duty 2

■ Format: **360, PC** ■ Developer: **Infinity Ward**
■ Publisher: **Activision**

It's credit to Infinity Ward's achievement with the first *Call Of Duty* game that, to date, only this sequel can eclipse the sound and fury of its battering set-pieces. So maybe it's unfair that amid the wreckage and shell casings and seismic eruptions of mud and cordite we were left a little wanting by *Call Of Duty 2*'s bigger, louder, longer approach. Still looking to be painstakingly scripted and funnelled (though the funnels themselves are larger), as if in fear of a player somehow missing the money shots, it's likely to be one of the more exhilarating WWII-themed rollercoaster rides of 2006. Allied and enemy soldiers alike edge closer to looking like their lives really are depending on the way they react. But after seeing comparable savage spectacle with more divergent outcomes in Relic's *Company Of Heroes* (see p53), it could be the year that the RTS outguns the shooter.

The Movies

■ Format: **GC, PS2, Xbox, PC** ■ Developer: **Lionhead** ■ Publisher: **Activision**



This could yet be a big star. And only partly because it has the dubious honour of being one of the first Lionhead games that seems more spectacular and full of ideas three years on than at its original outing. The game sees you building and maintaining a movie studio through the 20th century and beyond. You must also write, direct and – if you wish – voice act in short CGI films that must win the critics' applause and the public's dollars.

The team seems to have cracked making your creative output better the more fun you have, rather than leaving enjoyment down to the quality of your film making – and it's the slick interface and charm of the studio as much as the accidental brilliance of the films that will likely win it a massive audience.







Condemned: Criminal Origins

■ Format: **360, PC** ■ Developer: **Monolith**
■ Publisher: **Sega**

Labelled a psychological firstperson thriller, development duties on *Condemned* are being carried out by Monolith's experienced ex-*Tron 2.0* team. As with that title, lighting is a main technical element. One shadowy level, described as being at an alpha stage by lead artist Matt Allen, was playable at E3. Demonstrating a more action-oriented style than will be seen in the finished game, the player's goal was to track a serial killer through a gritty underworld using a variety of forensic tools. Combat is melee-focused and extremely bloody, thanks to the ability to arm yourself with blunt objects such as pipes and metal doors. Firearms are also available, but once the magazine is empty, they will only be useful as clubs. Expect to be very scared.

Gauntlet: Seven Sorrows

■ Format: **PC, PS2, Xbox** ■ Developer: **In-house (San Diego)** ■ Publisher: **Midway**



One of the most visually striking fantasy worlds on the show floor, if it wasn't for the regular booming announcements of Red Valkyrie and Blue Warrior's deeds a newcomer might have been hard-pressed to identify it as *Gauntlet*. Despite their beauty, levels seemed sparsely populated, rarely fielding more than four enemies at a time, and generators were half-hearted in replenishing the ranks. Hopefully it's a case of a skeleton crew for demonstration purposes – as the current numbers are easily scattered by a pair of players, let alone a full complement. The cooperative dynamic still engages, though the camera's traditional *Gauntlet* behaviour of holding the whole party back when one falls behind could frustrate online: it's one of many questions the limited E3 build left unanswered.





Possession

■ Format: **Next-gen, PC** ■ Developer: **Blitz Games**
■ Publisher: **TBA**

Another zombie game, but one with very much its own way of doing things: rather than battling the undead you are instead "the horror which people are attempting to survive," in the memorable words of designer **Nick Dixon**. Taking its cues from squad-based actioners such as *Freedom Force*, *Possession* sees you able to command entire groups of undead (Blitz is talking about numbers up to the 400 mark in the final game) via an accessible control scheme. Many layers of strategy come into play: in your bid to take over the city should you first approach the hospital, knowing that its occupants will be easy pickings, or should you focus instead on the police station with a view that wiping out the local force will save on additional hassles later on? Of course, this is only scratching the surface.









King Kong

■ Format: **GC, PC, PS2, Xbox** ■ Developer: **In-house (Montpellier)** ■ Publisher: **Ubisoft**

Despite having been at work on the title for a meagre amount of time, Michel Ancel's movie licence seemed surprisingly advanced at E3, where it was showing in an enclosed booth where a total ban on photography was being enforced. What's immediately striking about the game is that it is almost entire lacking a HUD, presumably in an effort to draw you further into the experience. It works: the firstperson shooter sections feel suitably jungle-sweaty, while the big-ape action, which sees the camera pull back to thirdperson, successfully captures the scale of the eponymous creature. Throwing flaming spears at advancing dinosaurs looks suitably fraught with peril, but it might well be flinging yourself around the place, *Prince Of Persia*-style, as the hairy one himself that proves to be the game's strength.







The Godfather: The Game

■ Format: **360, PC, PS2, PSP, Xbox**
■ Developer: **In-house** ■ Publisher: **EA**

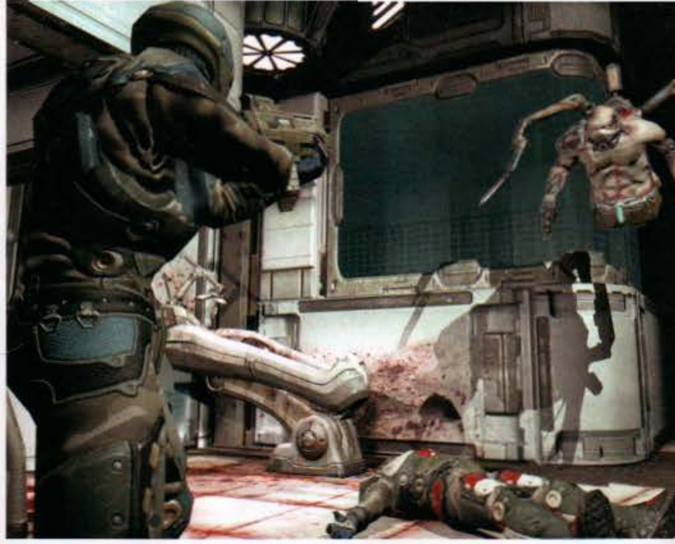


Our previous, very early encounter with *The Godfather* led us to question whether EA was hammering its tried-and-tested pegs into some very inappropriate holes. Funnily, its mechanics seem more familiar than they did before, and somehow they feel more convincing. The analogue combat system still echoes EA Sports titles, but now seems more purposeful, expanding from that two-stage punching mechanic to a wider, context-sensitive system of intimidations and attacks. The degree to which the game is pulling its punches, in fact, is admirable – honouring the theme of pulling strings touted from the outset. The vendetta points and crime-watch systems are also falling into place, making for an adaptive experience suitably attuned to its living world.









Quake 4

■ Format: **360, PC** ■ Developer: **Raven**
■ Publisher: **id Software**

We've never been particularly happy with *Quake 4*, just as it's often difficult (an understatement) to engage with id's *Doom 3* engine in general. Somehow, its Plasticine depiction of flesh (and just about everything else) tends to undermine its intended application as a purveyor of gore-encrusted nightmares. Besides the return of the Strogg in a continuation of *Quake II*'s storyline, the selling point of Raven's latest instalment is the prevalence of team-based combat, essentially promising an experience that evolves in an inverse manner to *Doom 3*. Sadly, the volume of cut-scenes suggested at E3, together with a lacklustre artistic direction and the series' apparent ditching of its grimy orange palette, fails to raise our hopes to the degree that *Enemy Territory: Quake Wars* (p53) does.









Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion

■ Format: **Next-gen, PC**
■ Developer: **Bethesda** ■ Publisher: **2K Games**

This sequel to *Morrowind* is beautiful, gorgeous and a host of other plaudits which will no doubt return to haunt us when it's seen running on low-end kit. In terms of graphical elegance, this is second only to the Unreal Engine 3 – and a very close second at that, although that will count for nothing without compelling gameplay. If you can recover from the shock of being told by Patrick Stewart that you feature prominently in his dreams, there's an enormously immersive, virtually unscripted world to lose yourself in. Not only are the NPCs advanced enough to lead their own lives, but even the incredibly realistic forests are 'grown' as opposed to designed. Like its predecessor, it promises to marry the best points of MMO freedom with a compelling storyline.





Tomb Raider Legend

■ Format: **PC, PS2, Xbox** ■ Developer: **Crystal Dynamics** ■ Publisher: **Eidos**



As satisfying as it is to see a more human Lara Croft climbing, leaping and shimmying upon and against a familiar backdrop of ancient vistas, the manner in which Crystal Dynamics has reshaped the series isn't without cause for concern. Certain elements suggest a retreat to 1996, while others indicate an attempt to bring the series forwards, but there's a feeling of clumsiness, additions such as fixed gun positions knocking the game into modern-day ruts it should really be avoiding. *Devil May Cry*-style combos certainly spice up the otherwise traditional combat system, but the lean towards an action/adventure blend runs the risk of averaging out the two dynamics – an especially tragic possibility considering the promise of the game's revised visual engine.





Black

■ Format: **PS2, Xbox** ■ Developer: **Criterion** ■ Publisher: **EA**

Gone now is the game's very briefly utilised 'gun porn' tagline, and instead comes the mantra '50 per cent graphically complete, 30 per cent gameplay complete', which, beyond mere statistical information, is a shrewdly powerful phrase when the game looks this solid. Even if the chaos of dust, ricochets and rubble shown is currently made up of tightly scripted, maximum-effect events, what's there is such a gleeful playground of destruction it's easy to be persuaded by those reassuringly low numbers. When every bullet isn't a dice-roll chance at success, but a physical object with an equal and opposite reaction, where every enemy soldier is a ragdoll pawn begging for any one of a dozen creatively catastrophic deaths, you can only sit back and wonder what the other 70 per cent will bring.





Burnout Revenge

■ Format: **PS2, Xbox** ■ Developer: **Criterion** ■ Publisher: **EA**

Despite concerns regarding the apparent injection of Criterion's distinctive racer into EA's yearly updates, its fourth instalment shows that the developer still has some licks of flame left in its boost gauge. With diverging routes available for each course, extravagant jumps and a more realistic palette, the brew has been sufficiently stirred to keep it interesting, if not as fresh as before. Crashes seem to have visually peaked with the previous instalment, though a new golf-inspired mode should give them a twist. That said, a more conservative raft of changes would be perfectly acceptable if accompanied, this time, by an online component that stayed on the road for five minutes without veering into a server-side ditch.









Tony Hawk's American Wasteland

■ Format: **360, GC, PS2, Xbox** ■ Developer: **Neversoft** ■ Publisher: **Activision**



With all its attempts at finding a fruitful new direction, it's no surprise that Neversoft's labouring franchise should find itself in a self-professed wasteland. However, this new arena – a single enormous level streamed via both current and next-gen hardware – may prove the most rewarding playground thus far. Looking underwhelming at first, the game's draw distance and fluidity in its '80s LA sandbox environment show promise, early indicators suggesting that its 360 iteration will give its visuals a long-awaited shot in the arm. With both of Microsoft's consoles set to receive online support, the developer seems to be performing enough tricks to make the series' extended lease of life well earned.






The Suffering: Ties That Bind

■ Format: **PC, PS2, Xbox** ■ Developer: **Surreal Games** ■ Publisher: **Midway**

Surreal's *The Suffering* wasn't so much a hidden gem as a brick that crashed unashamedly on to store shelves, there to be neglected in spite of its genuine appeal. Its sequel, we're told, sees the evil spreading further than we could have imagined – which, it's then revealed, means Baltimore. Picking up with an opener that varies according to which of the first game's paths was completed, it returns the character of Torque to his hometown, now ravaged by the same dark army that gave him such a banging personality disorder before. More of a follow-up episode than a dramatically upgraded sequel, E3 saw *Ties That Bind* inflate its cast of McFarlane-inspired bogeymen while tying up a few loose ends of its own, offering a snappier camera and generally tightened mechanics.

The Warriors

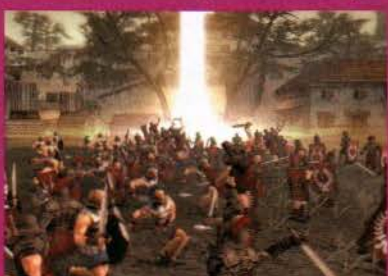
■ Format: **PS2, Xbox** ■ Developer: **In-house (Toronto)** ■ Publisher: **Rockstar**



There are surely few marriages better suited than that of Walter Hill's 1979 movie of gang warfare and New York-based publisher Rockstar Games – and the fruit of the union looks surprisingly good. We say surprisingly because this could easily have been churned out as an exercise in mindless thuggery, but, while there *is* an awful lot of skull cracking to be done in order to go with the territory, it's enlivened by minigames involving picking car locks in order to pilfer stereos, which in turn can be sold for cash, which itself is used to buy spraypaint, which is, obviously, the tool with with you leave your mark in rival 'hoods (in realtime, with the analogue stick). Then there are witnesses to deal with, stores to rob and more besides. And with licensed *everything*.

Spartan: Total Warrior

■ Format: **PS2, Xbox** ■ Developer: **The Creative Assembly** ■ Publisher: **Sega**



Though *Spartan* injects its mythological backdrop with the same blend of fiction and fatalities as *God Of War*, we can happily confirm that the two games are sufficiently distanced. Creative Assembly's vision hasn't been entirely divorced from the notion of strategy, even if its nature is now epic combat rather than epic combat management. Increasingly throughout, the player's shield proves as vital a weapon as their blade or hammer, the tactics that cut a swathe through one group of opponents becoming potentially suicidal against another. Against its backdrop of clashing armies, rendered to a visible horizon of 3km and enacted by over 160 onscreen soldiers, *Spartan* looks set to provide a scintillating test of both brain and brawn.





The Matrix: Path Of Neo

■ Format: **PC, PS2, Xbox**
■ Developer: **Shiny Entertainment** ■ Publisher: **Atari**

David Perry has been performing somersaults of glee over Shiny's acquisition of the first Matrix movie licence. Though E3 offered no playable code, the presentation of *Path Of Neo* at least ensured that, like the character it finally concerns, we can start to believe (again). It's yet to match (and will probably never realise) the fury of *Devil May Cry*, but the game is unquestionably slick and already a dozen times better styled and more faithful to the source than before. Neo's capacity for acrobatic combat, balletic gunplay and sustained flight have all been infused with the base model of thirdperson action, making for a game that, if it controls as well as it looks, will be less a reload than a comparative revolution.







Darkwatch

■ Format: **PS2, Xbox** ■ Developer: **High Moon Studios**
■ Publisher: **Capcom**

Darkwatch has shed its *Curse Of The West* subtitle – perhaps so as to not tempt fate any more than it needs to, given the development difficulties that seem to accompany almost every western title. Developer High Moon split from Sammy earlier in the year, and the game is now to be published by Capcom: its vampiric gunslinger seems to have survived his teething troubles intact – though we were unable to ascertain if mooted features such as branching progression based on your reputation and sharpshooting have done the same. As it stands, the basic gameplay doesn't quite square up to the inventiveness of the setting, but precise control, punchy combat and imaginative art design impress, as does the welcome addition of a cooperative play mode.





StarCraft: Ghost

■ Format: **GC, PS2, Xbox** ■ Developer: **Swingin' Ape** ■ Publisher: **Vivendi**



Now in the proven hands of the team behind *Metal Arms*, *Ghost* is hoping for one last shot in the arm before finally emerging from its lengthy hibernation. The early levels shown have been slightly reworked and tightened to emphasis action over stealth, pitting the player against wave after wave of Zerg with scripted marine accompaniment, but later levels promise to make full use of Nova's batch of psi abilities and accessories. Conspicuously absent from the playthrough, though, was a sense of truly inhabiting the *StarCraft* universe – you could name the enemies on sight, but they seemed there merely in body rather than spirit. With a projected release date well into 2006, though, there's still plenty of time for Nova to truly find herself.

Bully

■ Format: **PS2, Xbox** ■ Developer: **In-house (Vancouver)** ■ Publisher: **Rockstar**



In Don Simpson High Concept terms this is, of course, *Skool Daze* Updated For 2005. As you'd expect, it's rather more involved than Microsphere's mid-'80s 8bit classic: combat with other pupils involves punches and kicks, it's possible to strike up relationships with a number of girls, and you can take part in various sporting activities, from a game of dodgeball during PE to simply picking up a stray football and throwing it at someone's head for the sheer hell of it. Like *GTA*, *Bully* is structured around 'missions', although much more than that no one is currently prepared to say. Although we do recall one task which involved flushing a fellow student's head down the toilet in order to glean information. Nice.



Castlevania: Curse Of Darkness

■ Format: **PS2, Xbox** ■ Developer: **In-house (KCEJ)**
■ Publisher: **Konami**

It's a brave move, following the cool response to *Lament Of Innocence* – and the downright icy one to *Nanobreaker* (tied loosely to *Castlevania*'s console progression as it is) – for Igarashi to insist again that the *Castlevania* formula can work in 3D, but, after a brief demo, there's good reason to be guardedly optimistic. Where *Lament* took its cues from the more action-oriented iterations, *Curse* holds tighter to the *Symphony Of The Night* playbook: dropping the Belmont whip for a more traditional variety of melee weaponry, establishing the Innocent Devil system (this game's familiars, which now respond to limited commands), and reinstating *Symphony*'s experience and level system. *Curse* is still struggling for an ideal camera system, but anything less restrictive than *Lament*'s is a very welcome change.









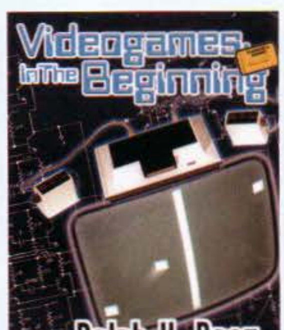
WHO REALLY INVENTED VIDEOGAMES?

Ralph Baer has a simple answer: he did. This extract from his new book makes his case

After an E3 dominated by new, startlingly ambitious hardware, it's sometimes hard to remember how much has stayed the same. Even in these days of Emotion Engines and Reality Synthesizers, the basic pattern of playing games hasn't budged an inch. You buy a box which plugs in to your TV. You buy games which plug into the box. You sit down and send signals to the box, and watch the results onscreen. Ralph Baer is the man who invented – and patented – that pattern.

That's not an uncontroversial statement: many vicious arguments and many expensive court cases have been devoted to establishing 'who invented videogames'. But, as is so often the case, the controversy arises because of confusion about the question, not about the answer. A seemingly simpler query would be 'what was the first videogame?' Most people's instinctive answer is *Pong* or *Space Invaders*. Gamers would name *Space War*, or look further back to Higenbotham's *Tennis For Two* or A S Douglas' 1952 version of noughts and crosses. But then arguments would break out over what constitutes a 'videogame'. Does it need to be viewed on a TV? Does it need to be played on equipment specially assembled for the purpose of playing games?

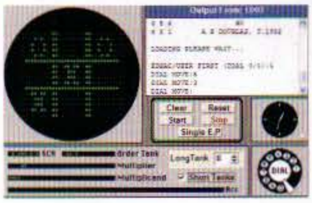
But while those games each hold crucial ground in the history of videogaming, for Ralph Baer, their claims are moot. That pattern – of player, game, box and TV – is his, and his alone. It was a pattern concocted on the concrete step of a New York bus station in 1966. Baer, one of the first television engineers in the world, and then employed as chief engineer at Sanders, a company specialising at that time in airborne radar countermeasures and anti-submarine technology, was killing time on a business trip by formalising some thoughts about how an ordinary TV set could be used to play games. The notes he made are reprinted on p71, and it was this document which proved persuasive enough to convince Sanders to pursue the project. A couple of months later, and Baer had a spot he could move around the screen. By mid-1967 the first game was ready – a twoplayer button masher called the *Pumping Game*. Despite a small budget and few staff, chase games, lightguns and sports sims soon followed. It was the technology which was to evolve into the world's first home videogame console – the Magnavox Oddysey – and which forms the bedrock of Baer's thirst to be recognised as the true founding father of videogaming, explained in his words over the following pages…

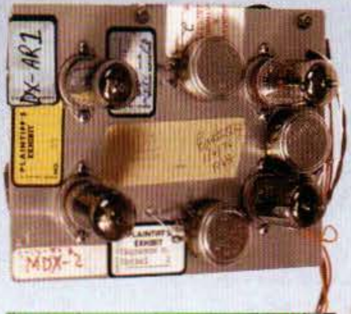


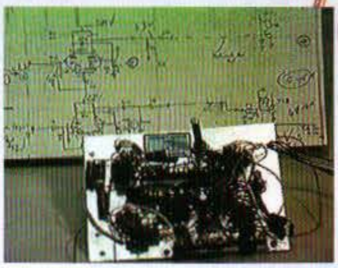
The full story of Ralph H Baer's extraordinarily inventive life is told in his book, Videogames: In The Beginning, available from www.rolentapress.com

ALL FOR NOUGHT

The first time a human being played a game against a computer was in 1952. The human was A S ('Sandy') Douglas, and the computer was Cambridge University's EDSAC 1 (Electronic Delay Storage Automatic Calculator). The world's first fully practical stored-program computer, the EDSAC ran at 0.5MHz and could process around 650 instructions a second. Douglas was a PhD student at the time, and as part of his work on human/computer interaction produced a version of noughts and crosses which could be played against the computer. It may be half a century old, but try it out and you'll find that the 'one-more-go' factor is as old as computer gaming itself. His original programme – written in assembly code – can be found at www.adit.co.uk/html/edsac_source.html and an EDSAC simulator can be downloaded from http://www.dcs.warwick.ac.uk/~edsac/







TV Game Unit #1 (above) was Baer's first protoype. Dependent on vacuum tubes (top), due to his unfamiliarity with transistors, it enabled him to draw and move a line onscreen, as well as control its height and colour

These days, the number of websites devoted to a topic may safely be taken as a measure of its popularity. By that standard, videogames are definitely 'in'.

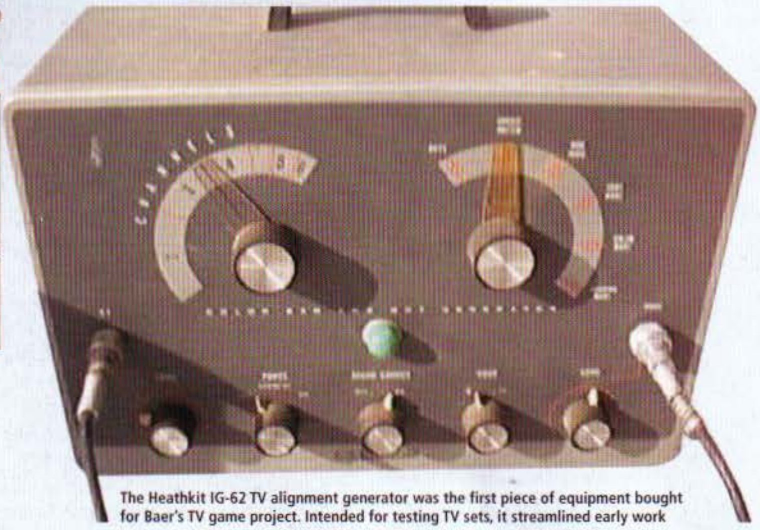
Furthermore, there are a lot of individuals out there who are genuinely interested in playing retro games that they fondly remember from their long-lost youth – maybe it's *Pac-Man* that beckons, or perhaps *Space Invaders* conjures up happy moments of a player's past. More than a few among these players are also interested in the story of how those ancient videogames came into being.

There are numerous websites devoted to that subject. Unfortunately, the accuracy of the 'facts' about early videogames chronicled on some of these websites often leave much to be desired.

It's probably no great shock to learn that many of the chroniclers clearly have no compunction about editorialising things when they can't be bothered to research the subject... that, apparently, being too much like work.

Then again webmasters, having once brought their preconceived notions to the task, then go on blithely ignoring suggestions to remedy errors when they are called to their attention. Obviously, they want nobody to screw around with their religiously held beliefs of what happened back in the primordial ooze. So, not only is there a lot of unadulterated editorial garbage masquerading as fact on videogame websites, but some of the commentary associated with certain websites is downright libellous.

It's only natural that the fulminations of know-nothing Luddites tick off those of us in the field whose hard work, knowledge and experience have truly contributed to the success of videogames. We have a right to get angry when some ignoramus who never lifted a finger to contribute to the field makes statements that denigrate those who did.



The Heathkit IG-62 TV alignment generator was the first piece of equipment bought for Baer's TV game project. Intended for testing TV sets, it streamlined early work

Whatever you do, don't ask one of these guys: "Who really invented videogames?" Like everything else in real life, there is no simple answer to this question. So let's roll back the clock, check in on some reality and see where that leads us.

The scene is Federal Judge Charles E Legge's courtroom in San Francisco. The date is June 13, 1982. **Nolan Bushnell**, founder and past president of Atari, is on the stand as a witness for 'the defendants: Activision, a Corporation'. At issue is whether some of Activision's cartridges for the Atari VCS game console infringe certain claims of videogame patents held by Baer, Rusch and Harrison of Sanders Associates in Nashua, New Hampshire and licensed to Magnavox.

On the plaintiff's side there is Ted Anderson, a partner in Magnavox's outside law firm in Chicago. He is carrying the ball for Magnavox along with Jim Williams because, under the licence agreement between Sanders Associates and Magnavox, the latter company is responsible for pursuing infringement of the patents. Bushnell has been called to the stand to testify on behalf of the defendant, Activision. **Marty Glick**, Activision's outside lawyer, is doing most of the talking.

It's almost exactly ten years since Nolan Bushnell attended a demonstration of Magnavox's first home videogame, the Odyssey. To be exact, it was May 24, 1972, when he went to the Airport Marina in Burlingame to check out the Odyssey system. He signed the guest book along with two other men from Nutting Associates, the firm that employed Bushnell back then and was currently producing his *Computer Space* arcade videogame.

Bushnell did, indeed, play the Magnavox Odyssey's *Ping-Pong* game hands-on. He clearly needed no instructions on how to play that game. On the other hand, his much more elaborate *Computer Space* game was failing in the marketplace because it was too complicated to play. A light bulb may have gone on in Bushnell's head the moment he played *Ping-Pong* on the Odyssey: 'Keep it simple'. Complicated games may work for nerds but not for ordinary people. At least then... at the beginning.

But that is not what Bushnell said when interrogated by Glick, who asked him: "How did whatever it was you observed, or thought you observed, about the Odyssey game compare to what you understood you were doing?"

To which Bushnell responded: "Well, I felt it was created by analogue circuits. It had no scoring. I don't think it had any sound effects. That it relied on overlays which, you know, anticipated certain sizes of screens. That the motion was, in fact, erratic and difficult to control. I felt that it was not a satisfactory gameplaying device."

It's amazing what ten years can do to one's memory, isn't it? Particularly if you have an axe to grind and when you are in court and on the stand in support of a party line.



Baer, now retired, is as active in his workshop as ever, often assisting museums in their projects to produce working exhibits of his early inventions



Five days after drafting his original proposal, Baer drew up a circuit schematic which would allow two players to 'chase' each other's spot. This dynamic became key to early game designs

Some of Bushnell's negative comments regarding the Odyssey's design were factually warranted. The technology in that game was identical to that which Rusch, Harrison and I had pioneered in the lab at Sanders between 1966 and 1968. It was, even then, getting a little long in the tooth, and I knew it.

I had Bill Harrison spend a few hours on October 10, 1967, looking into a design using Series 7400 TTL integrated circuits as sync and spot generators. I had another fellow engineer go through a paper design using CMOS integrated circuits as early as 1969. We have documents that show all this. Harrison and I concluded at the time that these integrated circuits were attractive but still too expensive for use in a consumer product. Also, they were power hogs and, for that reason alone, couldn't be used in a battery-operated consumer product.

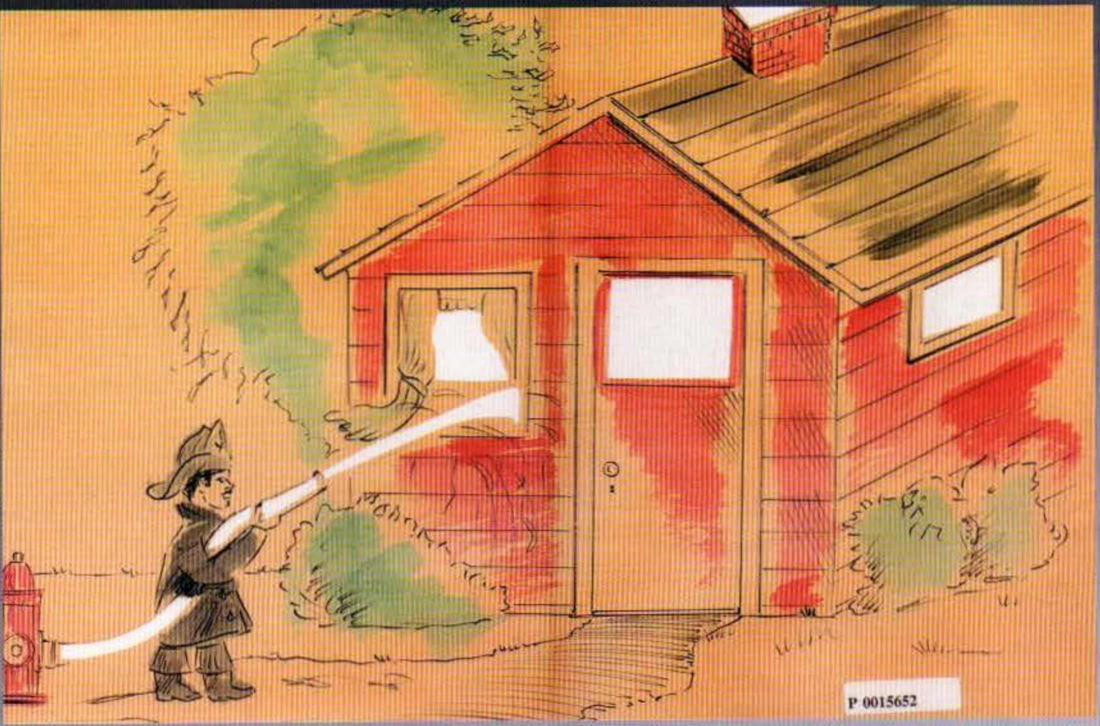
Instead, we stuck with discrete components such as transistors, resistors, capacitors and the like; the same kinds of parts then found in television sets. By the time we concluded a licence agreement with Magnavox, we were well into 1971, an eternity in terms of progress of electronic developments nowadays, and quite a long stretch of time even back in the '60s. After all, integrated circuits had been around since the early '60s.

Nevertheless, the Odyssey ping-pong or tennis game played like a champ. The motion of the spots depicting the 'paddles' or 'racquets' was easily and reliably controlled with vertical and horizontal control knobs. An additional 'English' knob added challenge to the game by allowing the player to adjust the flight path of the ball after it left the paddle. Slight differences of ball speeds, depending on the direction of the ball, were present. They were the by-products of the non-linear analogue circuitry used in the Odyssey system and its prototype, the Brown Box; they actually contributed to the gameplay, allowing more advanced players to take advantage of their existence. A ball speed adjusting knob allowed play at different skill levels.

So what was the validity behind this reference to uncontrollability and to the characterisation of the Odyssey game as being an unsatisfactory game playing device?

The short answer: it was bunk! The fact is that customers found Odyssey gameplay so intriguing that they bought close to 100,000 systems that autumn and winter season (1972). Both the press and the public reaction to the game was very positive, despite some marketing gaffes made by Magnavox. Meanwhile, Nutting Associates was struggling to sell off about 1,000 *Computer Space*

Not only is there a lot of unadulterated editorial garbage masquerading as fact on websites, but some of the commentary is downright libellous



A twoplayer pumping game was the first working prototype Baer and his assistant Bill Harrison created, and by mid-1967 a more sophisticated version was complete. The TV overlay had slots cut into it to, so the player could see his progress as he first 'pumped' the red fire out and then 'pumped' the blue water in

arcade games that the public had rejected as basically unplayable.

Between 1972 and 1973, 165,000 Odysseys were produced and sold. Pushed by aggressive advertising, the still one-and-only home TV game sold another 200,000 units in 1974 and 1975, its last year in production, for a total of 350,000 units. Not too shabby. So much for all that talk about how uninteresting and uncontrollable Odyssey's game system was and what a commercial failure it had been.

A look at the spreadsheet showing the detailed data of Magnavox videogame sales will put to rest the nonsense about *Pong* having started the industry. Another spreadsheet shows that Atari did not dominate the arcade business after the first six months of 1973. As the charts show, a large number of small and big firms first copied the *Pong* game and then went on to innovate different arcade videogames in the period from 1973 to 1976, inclusive.

The arcade game marketing data which I used to construct that spreadsheet in 1976 came mostly from Playmeter, the industry's premiere magazine at the time.

Bushnell left Nutting Associates during May of 1972 and started Atari together with partner Ted Dabney. One of the first things he did was to hire Al Alcorn, a young engineer whom he had met at Ampex, where Bushnell had been employed as an engineer before joining Nutting Associates.

Bushnell charged Alcorn with designing and building a simple ping-pong game. Would that decision have been made had Bushnell not attended the Magnavox show where he played the Odyssey hands-on? How likely is that? As it happened, Alcorn did a superb job. The first, developmental, *Pong* did extremely well on location at Al Capp's bar in August of 1972. The cashbox overflowed – so the story goes – after the first day on location and Bushnell knew that his arcade ping-pong game would be a winner.

Alcorn also built a portable version of *Pong* and Bushnell went off to Chicago to try and sell Bally on building the game. After failing to interest them, Bushnell did a gutsy, entrepreneurial thing: he decided to produce *Pong* at Atari. In November, he moved the company, such as it was then, to Winchester Boulevard in Santa Clara, where he had rented space at the Martin Avenue rollerskating rink. Soon, *Pong* was in production. The next year, *Pong* arcade game sales reached 2,000 units at Atari alone, launching the arcade videogame era and causing ever-increasing numbers of imitators to manufacture similar games starting in the summer of 1973.

There is probably something to the assertion that *Pong* helped to sell Odyssey home TV consoles. After all, if you had been hanging around the arcades and became a *Pong* player, there was just one way to have that experience at home: go out and buy a Magnavox Odyssey. As the other chart shows, about 350,000 people eventually did just that.

Now step back once more and think of how Bushnell might have felt when he first heard about the Odyssey. In 1970, while he was still working at Ampex during the day, he had slaved away nights in his daughter's bedroom to work on what was clearly an invention: an arcade-compatible version of the *Spacewar* game that he had played on a PDP-1 in college, along with other science and engineering students of that period. He soon abandoned the impractical idea of building the game around a minicomputer and decided to develop it using TTL integrated circuits, with which he had become familiar at Ampex. I don't know this for a fact, but working at Ampex, where the modern videotape recorder was born, Bushnell must have been surrounded by rasterscan video technology, being built into one product or another. So it would be natural for him to apply this experience to the design of an arcade game.

He understood that he could convert an ordinary TV set into a monitor by bypassing the front end of the receiver. And he knew that the design of the circuitry had to start out with the generation of reasonably accurate horizontal-on-vertical synchronisation signals. In turn, these could come from a timing chain that could also be used for player and ball-spot generation and their movement further down into the design. Although there is no record of any kind that tells us just when he first put his arcade and his TV experience together in his head, as far as he was concerned he was the original inventor of rasterscan-based videogames.

Close… but not close enough. Working at Sanders Associates in 1966, I had independently come up with the idea of playing games on a standard home TV set. I had never heard of, never mind played, *Spacewar* games, anywhere. As a TV engineer by degree, inventing something that attached to a TV set and shared many circuit and component similarities with TV



Magnavox's Odyssey was a pared-down version of what Baer had created at Sanders, and only narrowly escaped being called the Skill-O-Vision. It launched at a steep $100







It took less than a year for lightguns to be integrated into the project, and only one prototype (right) to reach a handsome, realistic replica rifle (below left). By December 1967 the quiz lightgun (above left) was ready. A descendent of the project's first peripheral, the lightpen, it worked by reading the number of dots that made up the spot which corresponded to each answer of the quiz: odd numbers were wrong, even numbers were right



TVG Unit #2 (May 1967) included an additional coincidence detector circuit which meant a spot could 'wipeout' a spot it was chasing when it touched it: even this early, it was game design that was pushing hardware design

sets of that era – that was a natural for me. Being a careful and well-organised guy, I meticulously documented everything I did, starting with a four-page paper I wrote on September 1, 1966, in which I laid out the whole idea of playing games on a TV set and defined many specific game categories. The object of the exercise was to come up with a device that would attach to an ordinary TV set and play interesting games. Since there were over 40m sets in the USA alone at the time, this looked like a business opportunity.

At the time I was a division manager and the chief engineer for equipment design at Sanders Associates, a large New Hampshire defence electronics company. The work on videogames started as a skunkworks project and soon produced useful-looking results.

By late 1967 we were playing ping-pong games and we knew we were on to something. By this time, the project had gone public inside Sanders Associates and we started cranking away at patent disclosures, close upon the heels of making the hardware work. As a result, when Sanders first applied for patents on my invention in mid-1967, we established once and for all who it was who first came up with the concept of playing games on the screen of an ordinary TV set: me.

We established once and for all who it was who first came up with the concept of playing games on the screen of an ordinary TV set: me

That makes me the father of videogames by definition, both in the US where the 'first to invent' is the controlling factor of who gets credited with priority of an invention through an issued patent, and overseas where mostly the 'first to file' determines who gets the nod as the original inventor.

Snide comments made by certain people on various cable shows would have everyone believe that I somehow got a patent on moving a spot around the screen and went off and sued everybody to make a lot of money. The facts are slightly different.

First of all, there was nothing trivial about inventing a way for ordinary people to interact with their TV sets, no matter how primitive the game was. But that is not what the first of the issued patents claims. That patent not only goes to the basics of the human interaction with a home TV set but describes novel games such as screen symbols chasing each other over the screen and wiping out on contact; gun games using photoelectric techniques for taking a bead on a target spot on that same home TV set and shooting it 'off'; other game schemes for playing multiple-choice quizzes; and more.

But what these 'experts' on the subject don't bother to look into is the fact that when we finally went to court it was to pursue infringers of something far more sophisticated. That was the concept and the implementation of videogames in which player-controlled screen symbols interact with machine-controlled symbols, such as the paddles and the ball in a ping-pong game. Judges in the federal district courts (and there were many trials in Chicago, New York, San Francisco and elsewhere) and again in the Court of Appeals totally agreed with our position, and tens of millions of dollars passed hands. So much for the simple-minded thing that the US Patent Office allowed this guy Baer, whereupon he sued the world.

Of course, I didn't sue anybody. It was Magnavox who went after infringers on behalf of themselves and Sanders Associates, to whom my patents and those of Bill Rusch and Bill Harrison had been assigned.

Mine and Bushnell's inventions were driven by profoundly different perspectives and completely different objectives. Ever since he worked arcade crowds during summer college vacations and had played *Spacewar*, Nolan Bushnell had the vision to introduce videogames into the arcade environment where pinball machines and billiard tables were the order of the day. My vision was to do something novel and enjoyable with some of the 40m TV sets in the USA and millions more elsewhere. We clearly had different visions.

Finally, as far as the priority of coming up with the concept of playing videogames is concerned, I did the work years before Nolan Bushnell, as did my two associates. As a result, we received many basic patents early on. One of these was the pioneer patent of the industry; others were patents listing Baer, Harrison and Rusch as joint inventors and then there was a patent that Rusch alone held which was also always in contention during the lawsuits.

By 1971 Magnavox and Sanders had finally completed the wrangling about the details of a licence agreement between the two firms. Magnavox now started to work on a production design. Since their management had dragged out the negotiations with

THE EUREKA MOMENT

This extract from Baer's initial TV game proposal – drafted on that concrete step in 1966 – shows how much of videogaming's potential he grasped right from the very beginning:

Background Material – Conceptual, TV Gaming Display

1. Intent. The purpose of the invention is to provide a large variety of low-cost data entry devices which can be used by an operator to communicate with a monochrome or colour TV set of standard, commercial unmodified type. Entry into the TV set is to be gained either through direct connection to the video system (at 2nd detector) or by connection to the antenna terminals, thus substituting the entry device (hereinafter called "generator") for the broadcast TV signal, by modulating an RF oscillator operating on one of the several standard TV channel frequencies, and tuning the TV set to that channel (channel LP for Let's Play).

2. Some Classes of Games Considered. The following general classes of games are presently visualised:

(A) Action games in which skill of operator (observation, manual dexterity) play a part. Example: "Steering" a wheel to control random drift of colour (hue) over the CRT face – timer determines which participant (hereinafter called player) can maintain the particular hue the longest, etc.

(B) Board Skill Games – i.e., classes of games imitative of checkers, chess, domino.

(C) Artistic Games in which the player manipulates controls to produce artistic designs, working against time (integral timer).

(D) Instructional Games designed to teach basics of geometry, basic arithmetic (ex. adding blocks).

(E) Board Chance Games – i.e., classes of games imitative of board games usually employing dice, roulette wheels, etc. to determine character of next move.

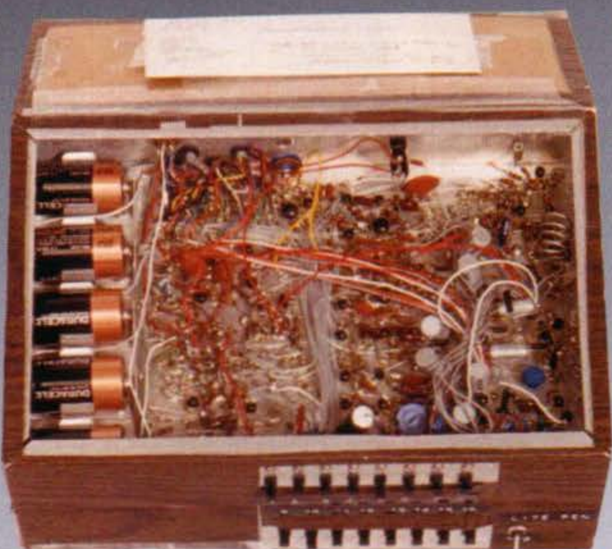
(F) Card Games – Games imitative of card games requiring intellectual "skill" or dexterity; such games might be played with coded cards which player inserts into generator.

(G) Game Monitoring – Players communicate with TV set while playing standard games (cards, skill etc.) for the purpose of entering score into generator and displaying it on TV set. Generator may have provisions to provide simple arithmetic operations (such as adding a player's score points).

(H) Sports Games – such as Auto Racing, using screen as roadway or obstacle course; or target shooting, using screen as target.



Completed in January 1969, TVG Unit #7 (or the Brown Box, as it was called) came complete with two controllers and a lightgun, and was 'programmed' by inserting pieces of card between its rows of switches: dots on the cards showed how the switches should be configured for a specific game. It was this prototype which was turned over to Magnavox, and which was eventually to become the ground-breaking Odyssey



Sanders for such a long time, their engineers had lost a year of lead time and they simply copied most of our Brown Box design. It worked reliably, so why start from scratch? That decision meant that the Odyssey would be built with 'old' technology.

Once both the Odyssey and Atari's *Pong* were out in the public eye, Atari (and Bushnell in particular) turned out to be much more adept at publicity than Magnavox. In terms of what the public saw, my reputation as the original inventor of videogames was a no-show.

On the one hand, there was my natural reluctance as an engineer to make a big deal of what I had started. This was aided and abetted by the fact that for its first two years, Magnavox's Odyssey did well enough for a brand-new concept, but videogames certainly showed no sign yet of becoming the hugely successful product category that they would become in a few years.

Furthermore, I had many other inventions to my credit by then and I wasn't going around crowing about any of those from the rooftops, either. The fact that our lawyers told me to cool it after Atari became a licensee in May 1976 also did nothing to put my name in front of the public. In retrospect, it was pretty dumb of me to accept that dictum.

Nolan Bushnell, on the other hand, had started a company and had different objectives and motives. He might have been initially committed to arcade videogames but once he saw and played the Odyssey, he was quick to recognise that a potential base of millions of customers in their homes was a hell of a lot more interesting than a few thousand arcades. While that business was taking off on the strength of *Pong*, the stepson of Odyssey, he acted promptly to get into the home game business although some historians claim that it was one of his techies, Harold Lee, who kept pushing the need for a home game and eventually designed one in cooperation with Al Alcorn and Robert Brown. It became Atari's smash hit when Sears bought 150,000 units of the game for Christmas 1975.

Meanwhile, throughout the early '70s, Bushnell wasn't shy about sticking his head in front of the cameras to promote his products, his company and himself. He was just doing his job as an entrepreneur and the head of a growing company – and a hell of a good job he did, too. Let me spell it out once more: Atari's *Pong* is a derivative of the Odyssey 1TL200. Atari's entrance into the home videogame business was also spawned by the appearance of the Odyssey. To dispute this is to stand the facts on their head.

So much for the relationship between Baer's and Bushnell's inventions. Now we come to other situations which are often used to denigrate my work as being less than original – with far fewer complaints of similar nature addressed to Bushnell, who had become a folk hero and something of an untouchable as far as his reputation as an inventor was concerned.

Fortunately for my legacy, places such as the American History Museum of the Smithsonian in Washington, the Japanese National Science Museum in Tokyo (their 'Smithsonian'), the Heinz Nixdorf Museum in Germany and other venues all have original or Baer-built replica 1968 Brown Boxes, lightguns and even earlier developmental hardware. These museums have placed those items in permanent displays accompanied by historically accurate posters. The Smithsonian is also the repository of many linear feet of data generated by me, Harrison and Rusch during the years of 1966 to 1972, inclusive. It is the existence of that data that made it possible to write the detailed account of what we did in the '60s and spell it all out in this book.

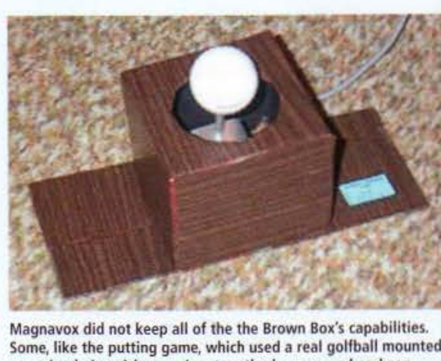
To confuse the issue of who invented videogames even more, MIT student Steve Russell's *Spacewar* is often trotted out as having been the first videogame. Well, it definitely was a creative, novel computer game and it was played on the screen of a cathode ray tube, albeit one using a vector drawing scheme unlike the method used by ordinary TV sets to 'paint' symbols or pictures on the screen. Secondly, it needed a $60,000 computer to make things work. Thoughts of converting this monster into a product for use by the general public were not even a glimmer in Russell's eye, or anybody else's.

Had Russell been able to read the tea leaves more accurately he might have realised the potential of what he was doing. Also, had he been introduced to the concept of patenting ideas at that stage of his development, he might have been able to get some claims allowed by the US Patent Office. For all we know, he might have been able to persuade the examiner to grant him fundamental claims on playing games on the screen of a CRT, never mind that his computer games seemed to have no practical, commercial future… then! But that is all hindsight.

What distinguishes Bushnell's work and mine from that early activity is that we both had practical ideas – eurekas, in fact – that could be implemented in the real world and would result in the design and production of viable products. That's a lot different from what Russell did and requires insights and experiences which were not commonly found in the halls of academe where Russell and associates played midnight games of *Spacewar*. More importantly from a legal point of view, Baer and associates did their homework, which Russell did not do.

The court recognised all of that and repeatedly rejected arguments based on the so-called precedence of *Spacewar*. It was Judge John F Grady in 1975, during our first patent infringement lawsuit – against Bally, Atari and others – who called my '480 patent the pioneer patent of the industry. That determination remained firm throughout subsequent trials in various federal district courts and in the Court of Appeals. We won every one of those contests. The settlements with Atari (who opted out of that first trial and settled out of court), Bally-Midway, Mattel, Activision and others, along with income from dozens of videogame licensees would eventually make close to $100m for Magnavox, Sanders and, last but not least, the lawyers.

While we're on the subject of playing games on the screen of a CRT, I appreciate that fans of technology in



Magnavox did not keep all of the the Brown Box's capabilities. Some, like the putting game, which used a real golfball mounted on a simple joystick as an input method, were axed early on

Britain have not seen fit to join the fray of oneupmanship.

In 1949 the so-called EDSAC computer used three special CRTs, one of which displayed the 1s and 0s held in memory. That display had a 35x16 matrix of phosphor dots. It could show the contents of one of the 32 memory 'tanks' (or sections), which stored 16 words of 35 bits. Back in 1952, a student called A S Douglas came up with the idea of playing noughts and crosses using the EDSAC's display. Now that certainly was a game but again, it wasn't a videogame. Fortunately for videogame history, it hasn't been paraded around to justify still another group's unshakeable belief in who invented videogames.

To put a finer point on it, what-ifs and even real inventions are a dime a dozen and not worth more unless they lead to practical results in the real world and stand up in court, if it comes to that. The concept of playing games on a rasterscan monitor or on the screen of a standard home TV set was undoubtedly of a pioneering nature and repeatedly passed all the legal smell tests thrown in its way, unlike Steve Russell's *Spacewar*.

The same thing applies to that other, much ballyhooed, game system developed by Willy Higinbotham. There isn't an engineer born into this world who hasn't fiddled with his oscilloscope and some function generators such as pulse or sine wave test sets and produced neat motions of spots and lines on the screen of his beloved oscilloscope. As a matter of fact, my erstwhile brother-in-law, Walter Sabel, swore on a stack of bibles that he saw me fiddle with my first DuMont 'scope in my New York home lab back in 1946 and make a spot go back and forth on its five-inch, round screen. Just like a tennis game, he said. Heck, I don't remember doing that – but it doesn't matter one way or the other.



Although the Odyssey (above) was schematically very similar to the Brown Box, the main difference was that it had a single main motherboard, into which were fitted modular 'baby' boards

Nintendo brought Willy Higinbotham's existence to the attention of the world by having him testify on their behalf during a lawsuit they laid on our lawyers and me in an effort to void our patents and avoid having to pay up. If they hadn't trotted Higinbotham before Judge Sands in the Federal District Court in New York in 1982, the myths of Higinbotham's game having been the first videogame would never have started. A whole lot of negative nabobs would not now be bleating about Higinbotham having invented videogames. As it happened, he did nothing of the kind.

Judge Sands was a tough, activist kind of judge and still Nintendo's lawyers (who hailed from the highest-priced law firm in New York) lost their lawsuit and had to pay up. Nevertheless the Higinbotham myth was launched. Like a genie once out of the bottle, it is still circulating to this day.

What really happened is simple. In 1958, Long Island's Brookhaven National Labs, where Higinbotham worked on atomic energy projects, held an open house for family and friends. Willy Higinbotham decided to put on a neat demo of what he called a tennis game, something interesting for the visitors to play with. He had a variety of Donner analogue computers at his disposal so he designed some circuitry and he set a tech to work.

Even real inventions are a dime a dozen and not worth more unless they lead to practical results in the real world and stand up in court

The end result was a lash-up of relays interconnected through the plug-board to one of the company's analogue computers. This ingenious lash-up would trace a horizontal base line on his display: a DuMont Model 804 oscilloscope, a later version of the test instrument I had on my lab bench in 1946. That line was supposed to depict the base of a tennis court. A short, central, vertical line served as the side view of the 'net'. Pushing a button on a small hand control box launched the ball from left to right. A knob controlled its trajectory. Pushing the button again, whenever the ball spot would reach the end of the 'court', would reverse its direction. Failing to time this button push at the appropriate instant would move the ball out of play. There were no paddle symbols.

The game delighted the visitors. After the open house was over, all of the circuitry was dismantled and the parts put back in the storeroom. Those analogue computers of the '40s and '50s weren't cheap and couldn't be tied up with stuff that had nothing to do with the serious business taking place at Brookhaven.

And there the whole affair would have been left to rest in peace if it hadn't been for Nintendo stirring up the self-elected 'experts' about who invented what, many years later, when videogames had become a household word.

Again: Higinbotham had invented a game. No question about that. But it wasn't a videogame and it had nothing to do with playing games on the screen of a rasterscan device such as a home TV set or monitor. Like Russell's *Spacewar*, it was a fun demonstration of how computers can handle and display ballistic motions and the courts saw it that way. A copy of what Higinbotham built back then was produced more recently by former associates of his at Brookhaven and is, reportedly, still fun to play.

I think I'll leave it right there. Luckily for me and my legacy, Magnavox spent the money to pursue infringers of the patents which it, Magnavox, had licensed from Sanders. If they hadn't, the revisionists would undoubtedly have prevailed and my contributions to the videogame business would have wound up on the ash heap of history.

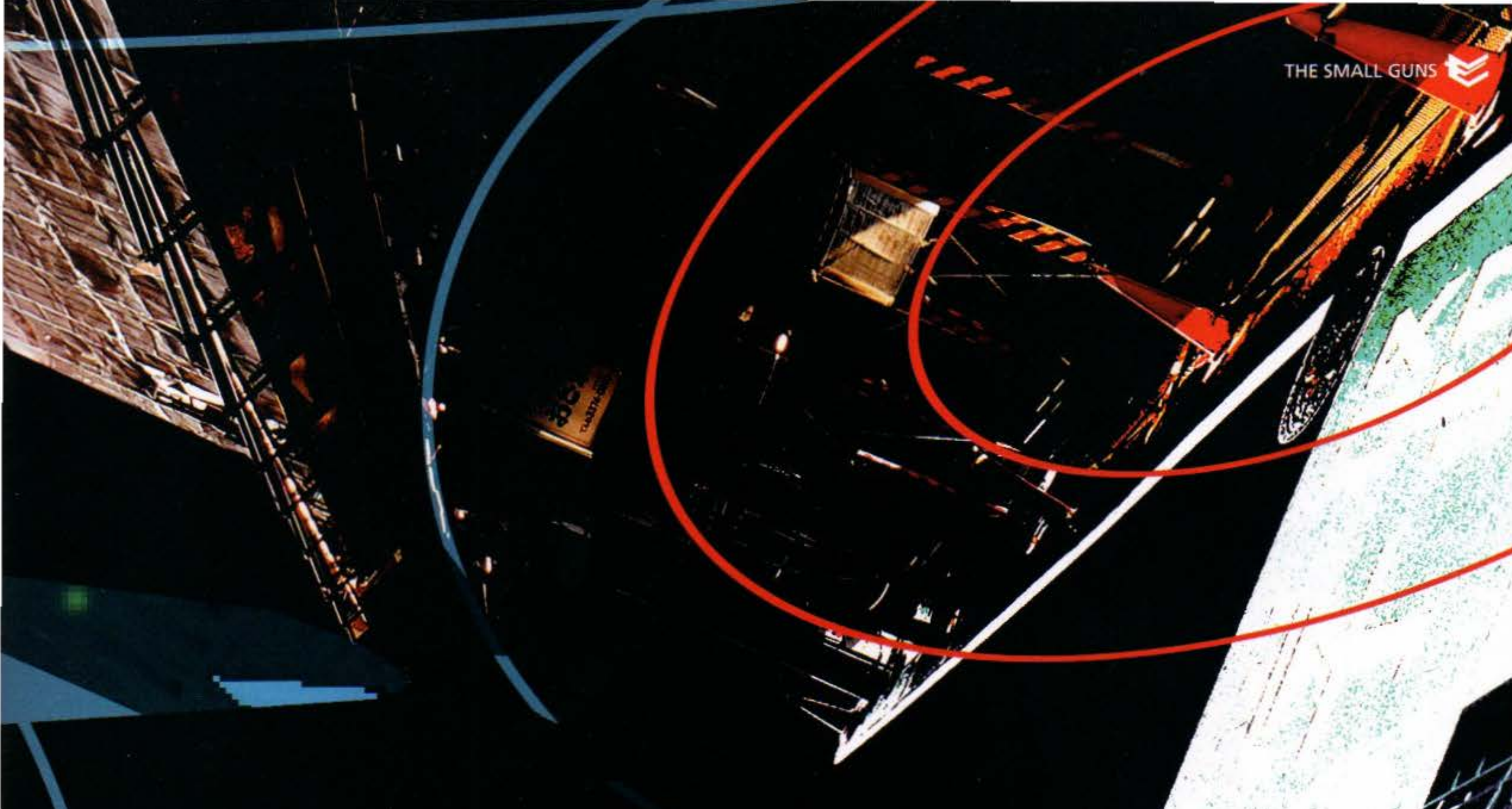
Convincing the Luddites that I am really the father of videogames is another matter. I might as well tilt with windmills.

WAR GAMES

Of the games whose claims Baer rejects, it's *Spacewar* which bears most resemblence to the games we play today. Developed by Steve Russell and others on the PDP-1 (below) at MIT in 1962, Baer – and Magnavox's lawyers – have successfully argued that its reliance on a vector drawing scheme, and on specialised computing equipment instead of a commercially viable domestic unit, prevents it from laying claim to 'inventing' videogaming. While it's clear that it isn't part of Baer's lineage, it's impossible not to respond to the sense of heritage that playing *Spacewar* brings. It may not be the first videogame – it may not even be the first computer game – but so much of what we love about what videogames have become is to be found in it that it deserves its place as a foundation stone of modern gaming. It can be played at http://lcs.www.media.mit.edu/groups/el/projects/spacewar/




NAME: HIROYUKI MARUYAMA
COMPANY: G.REV
TITLE: PRESIDENT
GAMES: BORDER DOWN, SENKO NO RONDE
G.REVOLUTION
NAME: HIROSHI KIMURA
COMPANY: MILESTONE
TITLE: PRESIDENT
GAMES: CHAOS FIELD, RAJIRUGI
MILESTONE INC.
NAME: TOSHIAKI FUJINO
COMPANY: TRIANGLE SERVICE
TITLE: FOUNDER
GAMES: XII STAG, TRIZEAL
トライアングル・サ・ビス
TRIANGLE SERVICE



The small guns

EVEN THE LARGEST ARCADE SHOOTER HOUSES ARE A FRACTION OF THE SIZE OF A TYPICAL GAMES STUDIO. BUT SOME TINY-BUT-MIGHTY FIRMS ARE MAKING IT EVEN SMALLER IN JAPAN

Japan's once-great arcades have shrunk to the periphery of the current videogame scene, and a stagnating home console market troubles the largest of its developers. Yet amid these adverse conditions, some Japanese studios exist on a handful of staff, stubbornly working towards the dream arcade shooters that first inspired them to enter the industry.

What keeps these companies driven when the supposedly low-end arcade boards are overpriced, the Japanese gaming market is in crisis, and the worldwide industry is pushing towards ever-larger costs and ever-fewer innovations? We visited three small developers – G.rev, Milestone and Triangle Service – and interviewed them to find out...



G.REV

The company behind *Border Down* and *Senko No Ronde* was founded in May 2000. It now has eight full-time staffers: three newcomers and five ex-Taito employees previously from the *G Darius* and *Ray Storm/Ray Force* teams. We spoke to president **Hiroyuki Maruyama**.





Perhaps due to its diversion from traditional shooter paths into arena-based duelling (though bullet hell is never far behind), *Senko No Ronde* has enjoyed considerable attention in the arcades and should see a similar reception on console

Why did you leave Taito?
The company decided to leave the arcade market, apart from big cabinet systems such as driving games. We understood the reasoning behind the decision, but we had joined Taito to create arcade videogames and we assumed the company would come back to the arcade videogame market a couple of years later. After more than a year working on games for the PlayStation we started to realise Taito's return to the arcade videogame scene would never happen. So our conception and will to create videogames clearly differed from Taito's direction.

Was it a big risk to form a small developer in a shrinking market?
You know, we didn't feel that risk, although making the company was a painful learning process. It took three years to deliver our first shooter, *Border Down*, in 2003. It wasn't our first arcade title: we made a puzzle game for just ¥3m (£15,100). But *Border Down* was truly our first step in the arena. We saved money by getting jobs from Sega and Treasure [G.rev developed the 3D engine for *Ikaruga*] and when we had enough, we did *Border Down*. That's our approach. When we spoke about our game to Sega, it provided the technical support and boards at a low price so we could start work, but we financed it with our own money. It took around nine months to develop the game. We are known for learning and developing quickly: our latest game, *Senko No Ronde*, took just a year.

Do you think the introduction of low-end arcade boards such as Type X and Atomiswave will have a positive effect on the arcades?
Low-end boards alone cannot achieve that. As the number of arcades in Japan decreases, the cost per board produced increases, lowering the prospective profits. The result is that arcade games aren't selling. With this in mind, we decided to release our latest title at a very low price – we love the arcade and want it to survive, so we wanted *Senko* to sell at ¥110,000 (£554) like *Border Down*. But *Senko* is a very original title that's seen as a risk by operators, who are consequently reluctant to order it. We had to increase the price to ¥150,000 (£755), to cover our costs. If original games could be sold at ¥110,000, I think we'd have a viable and dynamic arcade market.

"The fun of a videogame is not based on the size of the developer or the amount of money invested in the project. I really believe we can still provide a lot of fun even with lower-cost games"

The Type X is really too expensive – about ¥300,000 (£1,510) – and there are too many versions of it. As an interchangeable PC, it lacks the standardisation of boards like the Naomi. On the other hand, the Atomiswave is very cheap and its performance is not that far from the Naomi. It should have been a great option for developers, but in reality it's had a hard time sticking to its promises and Sammy hasn't delivered a strategy. The Naomi is still the best option, although Sega isn't pushing it. But, since there's a large base installed in the country, there's still a lot of room for third parties like us.

How much of an issue is money?
Of course it's an issue, but if you are patient you can avoid it becoming a big issue. If you want to do everything quickly, you have to find a way to get as much money as possible in the shortest time. This means taking terrible risks, possibly getting into bad deals that would endanger the company in the future. I prefer to take my time and save enough money to make my original games. Even if I have to wait ten years, that would be OK, because I'd still get to make my game. If you think in the long term, the financial issue disappears: imagine a three-year cycle in which one would be used to develop your game and the other two to save for the next title.

The GDC keynotes this year were very different: J Allard's vision of larger teams for Xbox 360 titles



Move to close range in *Senko No Ronde* and it becomes a 3D fighter – this deft touch suggests new possibilities even for traditional shooters









Border Down's title wasn't a *Continental Circus*-style translation hiccup, but a reference to its three-route Border system, offering different level layouts and intensity depending on the chosen border. Losing a ship drops to a lower border, leading to some expert play styles where players deliberately sacrifice their ships to hit the ideal sequence of borders during play

and Satoru Iwata's commitment to small teams with ingenious ideas. What's your take on it?
Both visions are right. It's natural that big companies will go to bigger projects, and Nintendo's vision corresponds very much to the way it has seen videogames for years. Both have their audiences, and if you consider Nintendo and Microsoft's visions as the minimum and the maximum, then we will have to find our way in the middle of this. It's not about a choice; there are many graduations in between.

Microsoft is really trying to appeal to many in Japan, and we have been told it would do its best to give us the best environment possible. But to be honest, since the PlayStation2 is already testing our limits, imagining the world beyond is unrealistic. It's more than just a technical issue; it's a financial barrier. The next generation of consoles will provoke an even bigger shrink in the number of developers, and I think Nintendo is focused on this particular aspect with its next machine. Sony's vision is not yet clear, but Microsoft is already thinking post-PlayStation era with its new Xbox.

If these three manufacturers offer three different choices, it's easier for us to choose our next step. If they all offered the same, we would be in big trouble, as would the whole industry!

The fun of a videogame is not based on the size of the developer, or the amount of money invested in the project. I really believe we still can provide a lot of fun even with lower-cost games.

But I never trust what manufacturers tell developers when they launch a new console. As a company, we will wait and see.

Many of the larger Japanese publishers feel the need to 'westernise' their games to sell outside the Japanese market. Does this affect smaller developers like G.rev?
In the past, we never considered our development as 'for Japan' or 'for overseas'. We just had the simple idea of making something fun. This hasn't disappeared, but it has been replaced by the concept of 'business'. I don't think creators in Japan are motivated to make games for the US because it's the biggest market. It doesn't work like that. People in big companies make games the company feels are needed to support its growth and because overseas markets offer the best prospects, they move toward these markets.

If someone in these major companies feels the need to make his or her own game – well, they quit. Why are videogames not selling as well as they did before? People are just bored. The boom is over. There are still many who enjoy playing videogames, but it's not the only form of entertainment. Companies who had spectacular growth during the boom now find themselves oversized in today's market.

Have you considered developing for the DS or PSP?
Many present the DS as the platform of ideas, of concepts, but the use of specific features like the touch panel actually limits your freedom to create. Of course, if a game makes natural and fun use of these features, I see a lot of potential; but if you don't use the pen and the double screens, your game is meaningless on the DS. Forcing you to use these features confines you in a very narrow environment, so I'm a little afraid about the machine's future. The PSP is just a PlayStation with a beautiful screen. I don't see any merit in that. Of course there are a few interesting titles like this use of cards in *Metal Gear Acid*, but so what? Why should I develop or play on the PSP? For its wireless features? If the wireless network becomes global and easily accessible, then I see the potential for very interesting developments, but currently the PSP is less of a console and more of a business move from Sony – for itself, and against Nintendo. As a game console, I don't see its merit.

How do you see the future for your own company?
I think a lot about the future, probably because at G.rev we have this habit of planning our projects in longer cycles than others. But in the future, I expect that our offices will be cleaner – that will be the only difference. I don't see bigger changes, expect maybe the size of my staff going up to a total of around 20 people. We will continue to make the games we want to do.

I don't see the arcade itself changing very much, except in physical size as cabinets get smaller. I think games will be broadcast in realtime via satellite to specially equipped cabinets, based on PCs. In the meantime, the business model will evolve accordingly, and I will try to anticipate these changes.

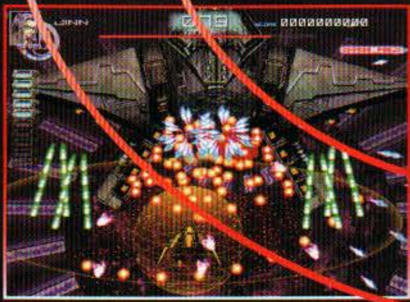


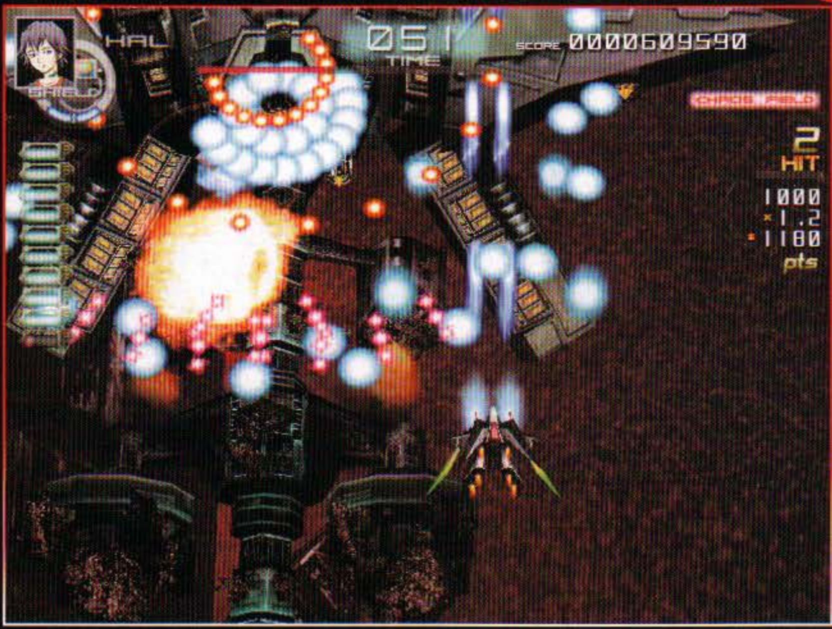
For the small team at G.rev it's not so much a case of bedroom coding as one of kitchen table development











Chaos Field's all-boss action allowed Milestone to focus on the (perhaps over-)complexities of its multiple weapon systems and dual play modes. The titular Chaos Field is the evil twin of the normal Order Field, hugely increasing risk and reward

MILESTONE

After the collapse of puzzle/RPG developer Compile, six staffers who had remained until its dying gasp and three who had left earlier regrouped to form Milestone. We spoke to president **Hiroshi Kimura** as the developer of *Chaos Field* continued work on its striking flat-shaded arcade shooter *Rajirugi*.

MILESTONE INC.



What brought you back together at Milestone after Compile?

I was 36 when I decided to make this company. My wife and her parents were pushing me to look for a good job in a major company, and I was aware that this would be the last time I would really have the choice of what to do next. I realised that what had attracted me to Compile had been shooting games; many of us had joined Compile to develop them, but the company was only interested in *Puyo Puyo*, so we didn't really have the chance to fulfil our dream. When the Compile adventure ended, we had the – perhaps naïve – idea of making a game ourselves and trying to sell it to a publisher.

What would you advise someone with that same aspiration?

Well, making games is nothing simple, especially for a small company. You can't just start up and develop a game in the hopes of revolutionising the industry. Experience is everything. Every member of my company has to handle many tasks, and I think it is the same with many companies similar to ours. In Milestone, we have a policy of self-motivation: staff come to me and explain what they want to do and why. We also have to deliver tons of work for other companies, so you need to anticipate trouble. When a programmer tells me he will be finished in five months, I usually add two more for delays. You also need to know the market. When there was no other form of entertainment other than the Famicom – I mean, you could play in the garden, but the Famicom was certainly the coolest thing in town – the hunger for videogames was strong. People like [Chunsoft president] Koichi Nakamura could make their own game with limited resources, alone. Now that's almost impossible, because we're losing money to competing forms of entertainment. It's not that you can't make a game without money, but it would be a very demanding process. You would need to save a lot of money to finance your project and you wouldn't eat much! But it's a process that people will support you through.

What have the challenges been with running a small development studio?

Our everyday challenges are no different to a large company. But, obviously, from a financial point of view, the conditions are not the same. When your project takes more time than originally thought – which is not unusual – well, you have to move quickly when you are a small company. Because you are paid following deadlines, you need to fill any financial gaps quickly in case of delays, and that can be very challenging. But the reward is that we have control over our work and direction. We don't have an old guy from the top making decisions about things he mostly doesn't understand or has no interest in. Because of our size we can make games that go against current trends; they're not just about the amount of polygons and effects. If we had a much bigger team, we'd have to integrate everyone's opinion into the game and lose its core idea as a result. In many ways, larger teams are an obstacle to a game's vision.

So, do you not intend to take on more staff in the future?

As CEO I look after my staff as well as looking after the company. In this function alone, the current number is the maximum for me. I couldn't care for them with the same attention if we had more staff. I imagine that if we were to grow, we could have a kind of pyramid structure, with new people under every staffer in today's Milestone. But we are still far from that stage: we have been on the



Rajirugi follows a more typical vertical shooter struvture than *Chaos Field*, providing waves of enemies to mop up with bullets or melee swipes

market for only two years, and we're far from being out of the woods yet. I guess we will have to keep our current size for some time and make the best of it.

How tight are you finding the financial conditions?

We were able to live off our work at the end of Milestone's first year. With *Chaos Field*, our publisher was financing it to deadlines so we knew we had money coming in on these given dates. But I've never felt comfortable depending on only one project, especially when it is original, so I tried to develop a side business for us, fulfilling tasks for other companies. One of our strong points is our low cost to perform demanding tasks, compared to the costs major companies would have to face with in-house development. So, handling both, we were able to survive and develop. Making only original titles is too hard and too risky; if we had we based the future of our company on the development of a single original project, I think we would have failed during that first year.

What has kept you involved with the arcade gaming scene?

Firstly, it's the simplicity. You don't sell a product costing ¥6,800 (£34); it is just ¥100 (50p) and your challenge is only about the coin the player can choose to put into your cabinet – or not. There is also this spontaneous feedback, and a certain sense that you are making an experiment: when you put your game out on location test, you find out immediately what is wrong with it and can tune it accordingly in realtime. These are very rewarding experiences – at least, they are for us.

Will the introduction of low-end arcade boards such as Type X and Atomiswave have a positive effect?

Well, I don't think they are that affordable, actually. The Atomiswave, maybe, but the Type X is not. You need around ¥190,000 (£955) for the board and a game costs at least ¥120,000 (£600). The main advantage with the Type X is the use of Windows as an interface; developers are used to the PC so this allows them to keep development costs down. But I'm not sure that lowering the costs of boards alone will ensure the arcade's revival. You have to think about the operators who buy these systems.

Because the videogame has had so little attention in the arcade market recently, its sudden revival through these boards is important and I would like operators to be able to choose between a variety of titles. However, we have to be realistic. We'll never go back to that golden age when every game in the arcade was a videogame, before 3D fighting games arrived. But I would like to see diversity in the arcades again, with videogames alongside other titles like Purikura ['print club' photo booths], 3D fighters or network games. The problem with videogames in the arcade today is their lack of identity: operators don't feel a need to have them represented in their arcades. Videogames need to become desired, so operators would want to choose between games like [Cave's] *Ibara* or our *Rajirugi*. That would be a revival for arcade videogames.

"The reward of being small is that we have control over our work and direction. We don't have an old guy from the top making decisions about things he mostly doesn't understand or has no interest in"

As for developing for home consoles, what's your opinion of the visions of J Allard and Satoru Iwata at GDC – larger teams for larger games, or small teams with fresh ideas?

Both make sense, and both would appeal to members of my staff, but platforms like PlayStation3 will be out of our reach for some time. We will stick with the PlayStation2, GameCube and mobile phones for a little longer, even when the next-generation consoles arrive. But if one of my staff were to say tomorrow that he or she is really determined to develop on PlayStation3, we would call for outside help. In Japan, companies like us are used to interacting, so Milestone would find the financial resources while other companies would provide the workforce.

What about opportunities presented by the new handhelds – the DS and PSP?

Again, I have no preference. It is like the new Xbox and Revolution: you develop for one or the other according to your idea of the moment. But we are developing mainly vertical shooters and neither the DS nor the PSP is particularly comfortable for this type of game. We need to go for new challenges to develop on these new portables.

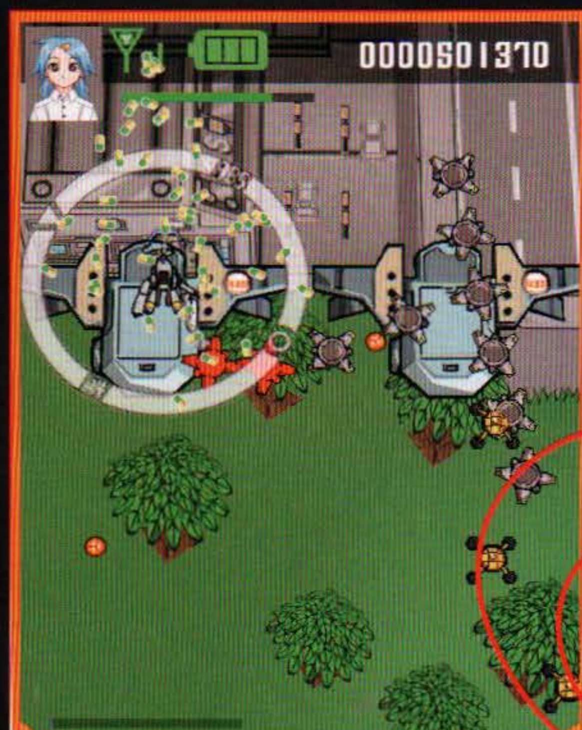
What do you think the future holds for Milestone?

Whether you're a small company or a big one, we're all concerned by how many copies our games will sell. However, I see no point for a company like mine to compete against larger publishers in generic markets like driving, RPG, and so on. I would like to be able to continue to develop original titles in markets where the larger companies have no interest, where they consider the prospect of profitability is not high enough. Call them niche markets if you want, but it depends on your perspective – the notion of a 'market' is really relative. I'm sure that for big companies the RPG is seen as the main market in Japan but obviously it is not for us. Our main market is located between the big ones.





Milestone's office shrine seems a calming contrast to the onscreen sound and fury – then again, the best shooter players (and developers) are always able to embrace a tranquil, meditative state



Rajirugi's cellphone conceit – perhaps related to the accusation that mobiles sap videogame interest – sees signal strength, battery power and text messages feature



TRIANGLE SERVICE

Of the three small developers we profile here, Triangle Service is the smallest. During development of *XII Stag* and *Trizeal* it operated with just three staff members, and is currently down to only its founder, **Toshiaki Fujino**.



Where did you work before founding Triangle Service?
I was a programmer, originally at Konami. I left because my work there wasn't what I originally wanted to do: my dream had been to work in the game industry when *Gradius* came to the arcade. I was part of KCEJ East and was working on a series of character-based games, mainly from Shueisha [publisher of manga mainstay Shonen Jump magazine]. I tried many companies before deciding to make my own, something like two-and-a-half years ago, I think.

Why did you decide to form your own company?
I was in a company working on an arcade shooter and during the course of development, the company went into bankruptcy. At that time, it sounded reasonable to form another company in order to finish the game and sell it. I can't go into any more detail because of copyright issues.

There were three of us in the new team: myself, the original designer and a sound creator. I was in charge of programming.

Is it possible to create games with a three-person team in today's climate?
It is not impossible. Game development is not only about the size of your team. Of course it depends on the type of game you want to develop, but in our case it was very much possible. You just need everybody to do their tasks properly and to have a lot of motivation.

What have been the biggest issues you've encountered, working independently?
The biggest problem for me is, without any doubt, the money. I mean, you need some to form your company, and the banks are more than reluctant to invest in a project, especially when you are so few. The risk management is very difficult, especially if you choose to focus on a single development. I considered getting some work from big companies in order to create some kind of safety net, bringing in additional revenue in parallel to my main original project. But there were so few of us I had no time to develop that aspect of the company. So I had to borrow money from my friends, people I used to work with in previous companies.

The positive side is all the control you have over your work, the global understanding you have of the project. In big companies, you are part of a big structure and you only work on a specific task – at Konami, for example, I was a salaryman and had no real input into the project. So any vision you could have about the game is not taken into account unless you are in a key position.

"It would not make sense to compete against the big players in the home console market. But as those companies have left the arcade market, it's become the playground of small developers"

Why did you decide to develop for the arcade and not the console market?
It was because of the game we were working on in my previous company. My plan was to finish it and bring it to a publisher, but in the meantime, another company acquired the rights on the game and released it. So I had to change the game into something original. It ended up as *XII Stag*, which Taito accepted to publish, first in the arcade and then on PlayStation2.

On the home console side of the business, there are big players occupying big shares of the market. It would make no sense to compete against them. Nobody would notice our games. But as those companies have left the arcade market, it has become the playground of small developers. I really don't regret taking the risk in founding my company. It has not been easy every day – actually, it is hell even now, but it has brought me so much satisfaction.



Previous project *XII Stag* (not pictured) was unique among the small developers profiled as a sprite-based 2D shooter. *Trizeal* returns to 2.5D

Do you intend to work on consoles in the future?
Of course I would like to, but to be realistic, a company like mine cannot do it without teaming with a bigger company. For the moment, my main objective is to develop for the arcade and deliver a game that will be recognised. Then I would like to bring it to the home market, perhaps even on a next-generation console. It is already hard enough to work on PlayStation2 because companies like Sony don't always trust small firms like mine, especially when it comes to supplying development kits. I have to work with companies that have already signed development agreements with Sony, for instance.

What did you think of the GDC keynotes – J Allard's vision that games will require much bigger teams for Xbox2 titles and Satoru Iwata's commitment to ingenious ideas with small teams?
This new Xbox is very much an American approach – that is, it is based on the American idea of entertainment with enormous budgets and huge teams only rivalled by Hollywood. Nintendo is a game



Trizeal is more infamous for its cry for help (see 'Supporting fire') than for the game itself, and Fujino takes responsibility on his website for its subdued arcade reception. It's not without its moments, though, including some entertaining bosses

company focused on gaming. I think the company is targeting small- and medium-sized game companies in its next move, the ones that will find it very difficult to work on the PlayStation3 or Xbox 360. Maybe I will have to go for Nintendo. I don't know yet. But the company has changed its policy recently, allowing small companies to release games on the GameCube, such as Milestone with *Chaos Field*. That's the kind of game that wouldn't have been accepted before. I really believe this isn't a move by Nintendo to fill an empty line-up, but rather to refocus on the game experience rather than a Hollywood style of development.

Do you see any promise in the new handheld platforms?

I have no interest in the PSP. It is exactly the same as the PlayStation2 was in its time: a machine that's not focused on videogames but more on other forms of entertainment, such as music and video. The DS, though, really is a game console. It offers a new interface and a challenge to exploit it through a new kind of games. It's an appealing challenge, but for the moment, I have no plans for the DS.

Will low-end boards like Atomiswave and Type X have a positive effect on arcades?

If the makers are working hard enough, I see a certain form of revival coming for the arcade, especially for videogames. But at the moment videogames are disappearing from arcades because the operators don't want to buy new ones. Today, we have less than a third of the arcades we used to enjoy 15 years ago, and so the major companies have stopped making videogames for the arcade. However, this has provided more of a chance for smaller companies like mine.

I prefer to develop for the Naomi system rather than these new boards, because it offers the best environment. Also, there are so many Naomi cabinets on the market that it's easy to sell new games: you just sell a GD-ROM disc. It's very easy and affordable for operators. I don't think I would develop for the Type X because it's too expensive for me and for operators. The Atomiswave is much



cheaper, even compared to the Naomi, but its specifications are too low. I mean, it is really a Dreamcast, after all. So again, I don't think I would like to develop on it.

Many larger Japanese publishers feel the need to 'westernise' their games to sell outside Japan. What do you think about this?

From a big game-maker's point of view, it's the obvious choice. They have a bigger need than mine to sell their games. But from a Japanese point of view, I feel sad. I fear this will make the Japanese style of gaming weaker, and I see no point in developing games like you would do on Xbox. I think Japan has its own vision and style to develop further.

Where do you want to take Triangle Service in the future?

For the moment, I'm focused on the consumer port of my second arcade shooter, *Trizeal* – I'm publishing it on Dreamcast myself because no publisher was interested. My two staffers were in contract for a specific task, so I made the Dreamcast version alone, handling all the aspects of making a console game, from the port itself to the package, manual, and so on. But in the future, my objective is still to make the top shooting game for the arcade.

Supporting fire

Fujino's public SOS – in Japanese and English – with regard to *Trizeal*'s flagging arcade sales and Dreamcast port prospects raised eyebrows, and page hit counts, from shooter communities. He has continued his address to the internet with prototype footage of 3D shooter *Project Lambda*, currently frozen but hopefully to be revived at a later date. The original cry for help and its follow-ups can be found at **www.triangleservice.co.jp/html/trizeal/sos/en.html**





Triangle Service's West Shinjuku offices are considerably more modest than the looming R&D departments of major Tokyo-based publishers

Review

New games assessed in words and numbers



84 **Psychonauts**
PC, PS2, XBOX



86 **Destroy All Humans**
PS2, XBOX

88 **Cold Winter**
PS2



89 **Nintendogs**
DS



90 **Stella Deus**
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PC, PS2, XBOX

92 **Area 51**
PC, PS2, XBOX

93 **Boiling Point: Road To Hell**
PC



94 **Star Wars Episode III: Revenge Of The Sith**
PS2, XBOX

95 **Dynasty Warriors 5**
PS2

95 **Smart Bomb**
PSP

Now playing

Far Cry



Besides an upward nudge to the density and detail of the game's vegetative splendour, Crytek's 64bit patch provides yet another excuse to brave its savage isles.
PC, UBISOFT

Red Dead Revolver



The wait for Obsidian to make that horror-western RPG it's always wanted to is a long one, but another shot of Rockstar San Diego's matinee can dull the pain.
PS2, XBOX, ROCKSTAR

Fire



So monotonous as to make even the most rudimentary of Wario's wares look like *Half-Life 2*, the minigames on the DS's Play-Yan media player can still fascinate.
DS, NINTENDO

Game and watch

Why playing with yourself is history



Some genres of game – particularly the sandbox experimentations of something like *The Sims* – have long encouraged gamers to become spectators. But what happens when that dynamic is introduced to a game like *Forza*?

Gaming has always been a spectator sport. In the beginning it was afternoons spent propping up a *Space Invaders* cabinet, counting under your breath as you waiting for your turn, willing defeat at every shot. Maybe your first taste of it was with *Myst*, taking turns to play while the other watched and thought and schemed. Or perhaps you live with a backseat gamer, someone who waits for you to get home and take them through the next few chapters of *Silent Hill* or *Metroid Prime*. These days, watching play is big business, as thousands flock to cybergames championships, and thousands more download videos of legendary victories.

But if there's nothing new in watching someone else play, there is a new spectator sport emerging: watching games play themselves. Not in the old sense, of seductive, repetitive attract modes, but in a new way, which is as dependent on unpredictable AI as it is on sumptuous graphics. The idea behind *Forza*'s Drivatar is that your pet AI racer can put in the laps for you when you don't feel like taking the wheel. It lets you ramp up a few victories while you get back to work or grab a shower. Except, all too often, you'll stay stuck on the sofa, as absorbed by the action as you were when you were playing it yourself.

Nintendogs is even worse: however glorious it is to pet and preen your pooch, often you'll find yourself tucking the stylus away. Watching your pup conquer his fear of a new stick is captivating – a mini epic told in whimpers and yips and wags. The moment your dog starts tackling the jumps and tunnels of the agility course himself ought to be the moment your heart sinks, the moment your game ends. But instead there's a stab of pride and a real sense of reward as he neatly clips each gate.

Although there's an instinctive fear that this trend must weaken games' unique appeal, in practice it undoubtedly enriches them. This isn't a poor relation of interaction, but an extension of it, since surely choosing not to interact is an interaction in itself. It's an old adage at work in a new environment: if observing an experiment makes you part of the experiment, then watching a game must therefore make you part of the game. How's that for immersion?

Edge's scoring system explained:
1 = one, 2 = two, 3 = three,
4 = four, 5 = five, 6 = six, 7 = seven,
8 = eight, 9 = nine, 10 = ten



PSYCHONAUTS

FORMAT: PC, PS2, XBOX (VERSION TESTED)
PRICE: $50 (£27) RELEASE: OUT NOW (US), TBA (UK)
PUBLISHER: MAJESCO DEVELOPER: DOUBLE FINE





The game's size is initially daunting, but its segments are so well interconnected that getting lost or having to traipse never becomes an issue. The game's base – the training camp – can be crossed swiftly thanks to a network of mine carts like this one, while elsewhere, bubble-blowing creatures offer teleportation around the sections of each level

There's a moment, around 30 minutes into *Psychonauts*, when depression kicks in. The game opens in marvellous fashion, with a brain-spinning title screen and a series of intro movies that, unusually, beg not to be skipped. Raz, a wannabe-psychonaut, barges his way into the summer camp training academy and gets exactly what such bullish behaviour deserves: three whole stages of tutorial.

It's during the middle of that first stage – your basic 'braining' course – that you're made to feel that, however beautifully things are presented, this is just a *Banjo-Kazooie* clone. A clone of a clone, where the player is made to jump through a range of banal platforming hoops while being introduced to an exhausting shopping list of collectibles.

But those tutorial jitters can be swiftly repressed. The pitch for *Psychonauts* is far more ambitious than its actuality: each stage of the game takes place within the damaged mind of a character that Raz encounters, and each is a logic-free foray into a manic psyche that needs to be cleansed of a troubling neurosis or two. It's a bizarre and remarkable set-up, but the skeleton of the game is unmistakably that of a hub-based platformer, with slight combat and tricky jumps interspersed with some neat puzzles.



The game's hub, called the Collective Unconscious, is a ring of doors that allows Raz to revisit the heads of those he's already cured. Smelling salts can be used to exit a level, and Raz can wave a rasher of bacon by his ear to tempt out Agent Cruller, a mentor with lots of advice

Even taken purely as a platformer, however, *Psychonauts* still shows itself to be accurate and easy to control, generic in structure but polished in execution. And it's a much more enjoyable experience than many modern pretenders such as *Voodoo Vince*, *Malice* or *Rayman 3*.

If you do take *Psychonauts* purely on appearances, it's extremely hard to resist the lure of whatever demented scene waits around the next corner. Enter the mind of the Milkman and you're dropped into a stark, paranoid suburbia that twists off into the distance at dizzying angles, patrolled by suspicious, robotic agents who wield household objects and lines of deliberately dim dialogue as cover. Your goal? To wake the Milkman from his shrine, taking in a wonderfully over-the-top, JFK-themed sniper scenario on the way and inadvertently kicking off a war between shadowy government figures and vicious Girl Scouts.

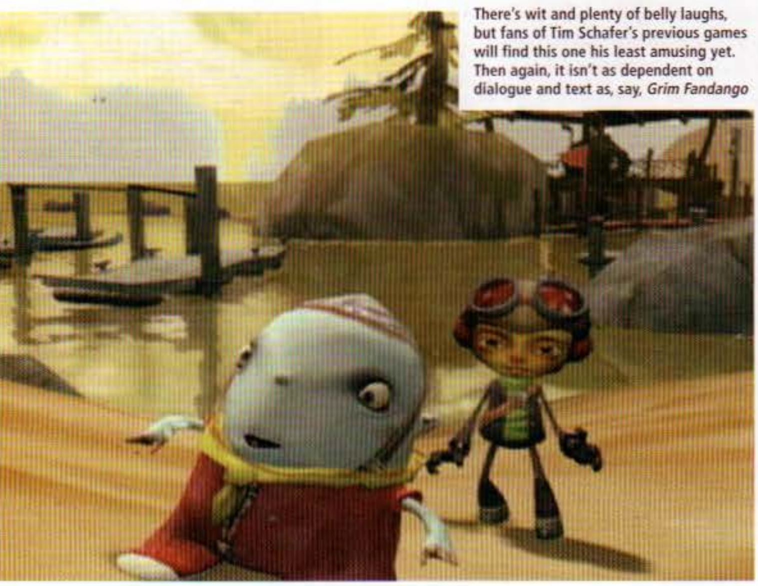
> Psychonauts breathes imagination and individuality as effortlessly as most games steal from each other, and its attitude is uncompromisingly stylish

The level of creativity on display, from the rich, stained-glass colouring book that is Black Velvetopia to an interactive stage production set in a failed actress' head, seems inexhaustible and is always striking.

There's an endearing attention to detail, as well, of the kind most often attributed to Nintendo's own games. You are rewarded with some kind of gag or response every time you experiment. Raz's clairvoyance, for example, allows you to see yourself from the perspective not just of other people, but of objects, too: hijacking the 'mind' of a security keypad, for example, will result in Raz being seen as a giant finger, and the bad guys, of course, see Raz as the bad guy.

Boss encounters, based on little other than pattern-recognition and weak spots, should be a trudge, but are rendered enjoyable by being easy to suss out, rarely stressful to fight and, once again, superbly presented. Battling a tank made from blueprints or a city-crushing supervillain who idiotically announces each of his own attacks before it arrives ('Overly intricate combo! Hard-to-avoid area attack!') is nowhere near an innovative challenge but is typical of *Psychonauts*' push to find vivid, inventive and fun ways to present traditional ideas.

There's wit and plenty of belly laughs, but fans of Tim Schafer's previous games will find this one his least amusing yet. Then again, it isn't as dependent on dialogue and text as, say, *Grim Fandango*









Raz's achievements are gauged by his rank, which is a thinly veiled completion percentage. Virtually every collectible picked up through the game will increase your rank. Abilities are unlocked or upgraded for every five ranks gained









Strip away that stunning skin and you can't help but return to the fact that *Psychonauts* is a platformer, a genre that has long since become boring. However, that boredom is more because of the immature quality of the genre's output than any innate deficiency, and *Psychonauts* is one of the most accomplished platformers of recent years.

It isn't any kind of reinvention, but a revitalisation, with a style so rich that it becomes an integral part of the game's substance; *Psychonauts* breathes imagination and individuality as effortlessly as most games steal from one another.

Even if the game's framework isn't spectacular, its attitude is uncompromisingly stylish, and thrumming with belief both in what it has to offer and the player's ability to enjoy it. Plus, it's bursting with something that few other modern-day videogames have in any noticeable quantity: charisma.

A mind is a terrible thing to waste, they say. To miss out on some of the greatest grey matter yet presented in a videogame just because of its well-trodden structure would be more like madness. **[8]**

Max headroom



Each of *Psychonauts*' stages features five pieces of 'emotional baggage'. Simple lock-and-key pick-ups, each requires a bag tag for it to be freed. Of course, the baggage is truly emotional – sobbing sacks of sadness which, when unlocked, trigger a cutely surreal scene that belies the triviality behind their function. Collect all five and you're given access to the Forbidden Memories of that stage, a smartly presented series of in-progress artwork for that level. Further memories are unlocked by bashing open vaults, another dim task that rewards the player with a terrific slideshow of character memories relevant to whoever's head you're currently occupying.









The Levitation Ball, introduced in the final third of the training section, gives Raz incredible agility, so he can perform lengthy jumps and move at speed. Despite its flightiness, it rarely feels difficult to use, reinforcing the game's solidity as a platformer







DESTROY ALL HUMANS

FORMAT: PS2, XBOX (VERSION TESTED) PRICE: £40 RELEASE: JUNE 24
PUBLISHER: THQ DEVELOPER: PANDEMIC STUDIOS PREVIOUSLY IN: E138

If a game ever reeked of potential, this is it. A slick spoof of 1950s creature-feature sci-fi rendered in a fashionable free-roaming framework, it's a videogame B-movie with production values far beyond what such a description implies. It should be the perfect equation – a *GTA* clone which for once has a cultural reservoir as deep as those plumbed by Rockstar. But ultimately *Destroy All Humans*, despite its promise, is the definitive diminishing return for a game based on that often exploited but often misunderstood free-roaming template.

The main culprits for this are the game's missions. The set-up is seductive – players guide Crypto, a snarling grey alien with a range of punchy and well-implemented powers, as he lays the groundwork for an imminent invasion of Earth – but the execution is less alluring. With few exceptions, they're bland and simple, and rarely feel rewarding. Peripheral missions and collectibles are there for the taking, but a majority of the sidequests feel too much like roughage: blank rampage variations or checkpoint races that tire extremely quickly, and age the game prematurely. They seldom push the player to make inventive use of Crypto's varied talents, and this failing is rammed home by the strange lack of mid-mission checkpoints. Objectives are often multi-part and well regimented, giving plenty of opportunity for the insertion of a soft restart point; despite a useful recharging shield, death can come quickly for Crypto when facing the upper tiers of human resistance, and having to restart a lengthy mission completely only reinforces the drabness of its objectives. Of course, one of the *GTA* series' perennial problems is its unfriendly mission structure, but its games have always had enough texture and substance to keep players absorbed and experimenting. There are still highlights, though, such as having to hypnotise a soldier into driving an army truck along a length of road and then removing every obstacle in its path without being detected, but such standouts are few and far between.

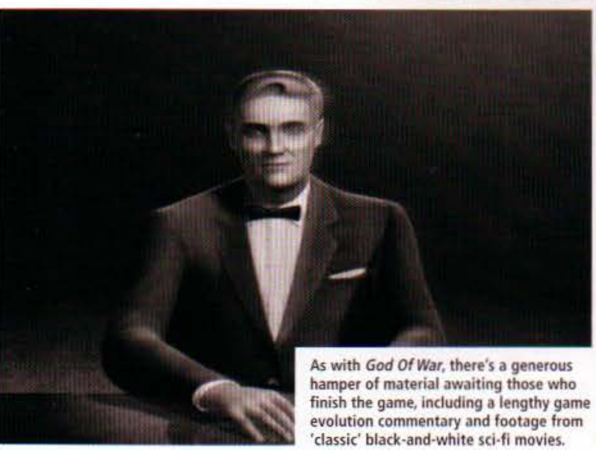
But despite the dullness of his tasks,



Curiously, a handful of the game's missions end with Crypto disguised as an authority figure and addressing a crowd of humans. He has to select the correct responses to questions posed during these meetings in order to deflect attention away from his own exploits

The gameworld is broken up into a number of large environments across Commie-hating 1950s America. Revisiting levels purely to explore often leads to confrontation with an escalating level of resistance, due to the entire population having such an understandable hostility towards Crypto





As with *God Of War*, there's a generous hamper of material awaiting those who finish the game, including a lengthy game evolution commentary and footage from 'classic' black-and-white sci-fi movies.







The soundbites of dialogue produced whenever Crypto scans a human are often brilliant, commenting wryly on the quiet insanities of suburban life, and other subjects such as pornography and the internet. It's a shame, then, that the game seems so determined to make the player sick of them







Production values are strong and certain scenes – such as the takeoff of Crypto's saucer – make for an attractive sight. Despite the lack of blood, Crypto's offensives are refreshingly violent, with each new weapon causing humans to be electrified/immolated/ probed in a fashion that's as comedic as it is vicious

Crypto's capabilities are still striking. Whereas *Spider-Man 2* offers extreme acrobatics, *Destroy All Humans* offers extreme destruction, both on foot and from the air via Crypto's flying saucer. His powers are extremely satisfying, giving the player some tremendous weapons and enough psychic powers to wreak plenty of mess: the beautifully squelchy Anal Probe can cause humans so much trauma that they keel over and their heads explode, spilling their brains along with precious DNA (required for purchasing upgrades). The Disintegrator Ray chars targets to a pile of ash, while the Ion Detonator vaporises them into a milky cloud of atoms. Crypto also has a jetpack that allows him to gain enough height to assault the cosy population from pretty much any rooftop, but his main mode of transport is the saucer. Landed and launched from a handful of predetermined spots on each map, it also exists for the sake of causing devastation on a grand scale. When attacking from the sky, Crypto can level all buildings within each stage, a gratifying possibility that, once again, never feels anything more than throwaway fun. Missions that require air-to-ground destruction are similarly pleasing to begin with, but grind all too quickly. Despite these three modes of locomotion, this isn't a game which encourages exploring: travel by foot is too slow and by saucer too regimented, and when you do branch out, there's little to find except more uninspiring mission markers.

Another curious design choice gets in the way, too: when Crypto assumes a Holobob (human disguise) form, he has to continually scan nearby civilians to keep his psychic energy topped up. Each scan produces a short skit of internal dialogue from that person. These little bursts of satire are often genuinely funny, as is so much of the game's attentive and colourful approach to its settings, but are made to feel like an encumbrance, and before long the game's voice volume has to be turned off completely to shush this irritating din, especially when it begins to overlap with orders delivered by Crypto's superiors. Since this Holobob disguise is the player's stealthy alternative for achieving objectives – and something that's often compulsory – it's hard for it to become anything but an irritation.

Destroy All Humans occupies the same territory as *Spider-Man 2*, where a polished and entertaining combat and control system is muted by dreary structure in terms of both its main story and peripheral distractions. Initial joy gives way to an inescapable sensation of flatness and missed opportunity, of a game with all the right components for a thrilling, open-ended experience, but no true way of pulling them all together in a deservedly fulfilling fashion. It's very easy to while away time just terrorising the populace of each level in increasingly destructive fashion, but to actually care enough to contribute anything to a completion percentage is another matter entirely. It's a strangely alien anatomy with lots of strength but little coordination – plenty of muscle, not enough bones – and not enough power to invade the space already colonised by games like *Mercenaries* and *San Andreas*. **[6]**

> The beautifully squelchy Anal Probe can cause humans so much trauma that they keel over and their heads explode, spilling their brains



Crypto's flying saucer features a Death Ray for quick but weak demolition, and an Abducto Beam useful for snatching up human vehicles to use as impromptu wrecking balls. The Quantum Deconstructor is the saucer's ultimate attack, but it's the formidable Sonic Boom that's the most entertaining, sending cars and people flipping through the air like suitably puny insects

Deploy All Humans



Crypto is confronted by three different factions of human resistance as he commits ever greater acts of carnage. The police and army form the obvious first two waves, but the third – Majestic – is the most intriguing, being a secretive organisation equally obsessed with ruling the planet. Majestic agents tote guns as ferocious as Crypto's, and can dissolve his Holobob disguise if he strays near them. Later in the game, Majestic wheels out its deadly robot troops, and then psychic special agents capable of flooring Crypto with supernatural attacks while nullifying his own powers. It's the army's tanks, however, that prove the most dangerous – just two turret shots are enough to put Crypto down for good.





The menu that governs how you interact with scenery appears initially cumbersome, but ultimately proves instinctive. Objects can be tipped to form cover, dragged to block doorways, and thrown with ease



COLD WINTER

FORMAT: PS2 PRICE: £40 RELEASE: OUT NOW
PUBLISHER: VIVENDI DEVELOPER: SWORDFISH STUDIOS
PREVIOUSLY IN: E132, E148



Winter chills



Written in conjunction with noted sci-fi author and graphic novelist Warren Ellis, *Cold Winter's* storyline laces a tale of latter-day espionage with a distinctly modern layer of grit. Its lavish cinematics are rendered using a more detailed but stylistically consistent version of the in-game engine. They provide seamless stepping stones from one diverse environment to the next, packing in enough back-plot to turn even the game's more incidental characters into fully fledged protagonists. It isn't the first title to spring unexpected twists, real-world emotion or, for that matter, Tom Baker, on its audience but it's a definite cut above the competing majority.

Now that it's been divided up, reproduced and somewhat outshone by successive firstperson shooters, could the old lightning of *GoldenEye* still be recognisable, or even relevant, if it strikes a second time? In the case of *Cold Winter*, the answer is yes – but a very conditional yes.

What *Cold Winter* achieves, with arguably greater success than any other attempt, is the innate kick of gunplay: the dirty pleasure of dissecting foes with precision fire. In *Cold Winter*, gunshots wound in more tangible ways than the absorption of invisible hit points or the climactic triggering of animated death throes. Bodies recoil spectacularly; limbs are chiselled off in a puff of gristle when struck at the joint; bullets audibly thump a path through fabric and flesh. The mileage obtained from throwing a handful of variously intelligent enemies into an arena peppered with real-world physics, exploding barrels and interactive furniture is impressive, especially in a genre where such fundamental design is more often a curse than a blessing.

As for capsizing the notion that 80 per cent of gamers never complete their games: mission accomplished, for better and for worse. This is a triumph of essential videogame engineering, ultimately accessible and immediately enjoyable, leaving a tingle in the fingers when it's not being played.

But while many a fat smile will rise, for most the heart will never race, and it's this that reveals the coin's flipside.

The game has been streamlined to a point at which everything is instantly achievable, requiring one or two restarts at the most. The objective system is one of thinly veiled lever pulls and button presses, few of them ever working that requirement into a thrilling set-piece. Shrugging off a hail of bullets while lining up one headshot after another becomes a nasty, if pleasurable, habit – the game statistically tipped in the player's favour to an overwhelming extent.

Higher difficulties, culminating in the unlockable Elite mode, don't quite pull off *Halo's* legendary trick of elevating the experience by merely tweaking those numbers. It's challenging, yes, but when enemy grunts begin soaking up multiple shots to the face before the head finally pops, it all becomes tellingly artificial. And then there's the language. The irony of Swordfish Studios' keenness to kick the Bond franchise in its peculiars as aggressively as possible is that *Cold Winter* is weakest when it does so. Every character that opens its mouth to speak succumbs, often very quickly, to an agonisingly unimaginative bout of swearing. Hero Andrew Sterling may have an upper lip as stiff as David Niven's, but what comes out from under it is a constant stream of filth. This culminates in the game's verbally astonishing dénouement where the use of the f-word may or may not outnumber the bullets – it's genuinely hard to tell.

Because it nobly tries to address a valid concern of modern gaming, *Cold Winter* is better appreciated as a portfolio piece in its developer's CV than as a feature in the console FPS landscape. Its insight into what lay beneath *GoldenEye's* unforgettable skin is commendable. But the subsequent attempt to update and embellish the formula is, while a gleeful pleasure, not wholly successful. **[6]**



Multiplayer adopts a variety of familiar modes, playable both in splitscreen and online. The ground doesn't shake after a few games as it did during the *GoldenEye* era, but then times have moved on and the competition is fierce

The book has most definitely been thrown at *Winter's* effects department, with bloom and particle effects tied in abundance to at least one object or surface in almost every frame. As a PlayStation2-exclusive title, it stands out











The world of *Nintendogs* is a such a pastiche of clean European living that it almost borders on the bizarre. Money won in competitions can be invested in a few gradually grander houses, but there's no way to interact with their environments



When your dog fouls the street, you need to pick up the offending matter with a quick tap of the stylus. Using your finger instead is instantly and impressively repellent



NINTENDOGS

FORMAT: DS PRICE: ¥4,800 (£24) RELEASE: OUT NOW (JAPAN), TBC (UK)
PUBLISHER: NINTENDO DEVELOPER: IN-HOUSE PREVIOUSLY IN: E149

It's hard to imagine a less appropriate face for a 'killer' app: all limpid eyes and fluffy tummies, *Nintendogs* has proven that you can sell hardware, not with the crash and bang of most system sellers, but with a whimper. DS sales quintupled on its release in Japan, and there's good reason to believe that jump with be echoed – if not equalled – when the game reaches the US and Europe.



You can keep up to three pups in your house at one time – others can be boarded at the dog hotel. Connecting with other *Nintendogs* owners unlocks all the breeds

Not a bad track record for something that's only a few steps beyond the old, tired rudiments of pet-rearing software. Pick your pup, give him a name, and then feed, walk, water and dress him. A modest selection of toys, bowties and tiaras add a whisker of variety to your fun. The only aspect of the experience which constitutes a game are the competitions you can enter your dog in (see 'Paws screen'), but there are only three of these, and they soon become repetitive. Your pups never change or age. *Nintendogs* is not a game with depth.

Depth, of course, is not the point. *Nintendogs* was designed to be the proof of Nintendo's pudding. Iwata said touch and voice would revolutionise gaming's demographic and this game has proved him right. Bolstered by some very fine animation, interacting with your pup is immediate, instinctive and rewarding. It's impossible to resist scratching him under the chin until he staggers a few squint steps to the side, woozy with doggy delirium, duping him into chasing his own tail or playing tug of war hard enough to spin him off his feet. *Nintendogs* may have limited horizons, but it fills them with lively, captivating warmth.

It also has a sound understanding of how non-gamers want to play. Despite its Tamagotchi roots, *Nintendogs* has none of that genre's tyranny. Neglect your dog for weeks at a time and all he'll suffer is a few flea-bites and an attack of the grumps that five minutes of playtime will cure. Other than a limitation on how many competitions each dog can enter a day, there's no attempt to impose a clumsy game structure on top of the experience. The full pleasure of *Nintendogs* is on tap, unrationed, almost from the moment you start the game.

There are problems, however. The voice recognition, which lets you teach your dog a series of increasingly sophisticated tricks, is unpredictable, even allowing for the moodiness of your pet. The frustration of the 'Etc' items – picture frames, boxes of tissues and the like – which can be tossed uselessly on to the floor rather than integrated into your house seems to point to a level of customisation which *Nintendogs* simply can't provide. And the magical animation, while brilliantly capturing the spirit of floppy puppy exuberance, can't always capture its actual mechanics: watching two dogs make friends can be as unsettling as it is entertaining.

Ultimately, while *Nintendogs* might be the perfect piece of DS software – the perfect way to reach out to the demographic Nintendo is so determined to woo – it's not a perfect game. There's more to be got out of this new kind of play than Nintendo has found this time around, and some of it could be better implemented. But, for now, it offers an experience which can't be matched. It's not so much a glorified Tamagotchi as a glorious one: no risk, all reward. **[7]**

Paws screen



While *Nintendogs'* three minigames – flying disk throwing, agility training and obedience training – quickly become repetitive, that doesn't diminish their charm or challenge. Cleverly, success depends on a good performance from both the player and his pet. Making sure your dog is well trained, well groomed and in a good and pliant mood is essential. However, your own skills have to be up to scratch – leading your dog clearly around the agility course and sending the disk into the air with a satisfying flick of the stylus. It means that even once each game is mastered it still proves rewarding to play.



STELLA DEUS: THE GATE OF ETERNITY

FORMAT: PS2 PRICE: $50 (£27) RELEASE: OUT NOW (US), TBA (UK)
PUBLISHER: ATLUS USA DEVELOPER: PINEGROW
PREVIOUSLY IN: E138, E149



The voice acting is not only terrible, unforgivable given Atlus' excellent job of localising *Disgaea*, but doubly off-putting due to wholly inconsistent volume levels

HP source



Each squad member is given 100 action points at the start of their turn. Every action you perform, from moving across the arena to using items and attacks, depletes this pool of points. The more action points you have left at the end of each character's move, the sooner that character gets to have another turn. Often, doing less each turn can be more beneficial as it will allow two moves to be performed by one character before an enemy attack. Here, even more so than in *Final Fantasy Tactics*, which introduced this system, the turn order is key to successful strategising and battles can be won or lost on successful management of action points.

In its recent trio of releases, Nippon Ichi systematically tore the strategy RPG genre limb from limb before – against all odds – successfully rebuilding it into a new, exuberant animal. But the bucking bronco ride of *Disgaea* has thrown many loyal players off this traditionally sedentary genre and into the arms of less strenuous game styles, and it's *Stella Deus* which stands to bridge that gap, its more conservative and comfortably recognisable craft providing a gentler lead in to what can be one of the most unforgiving corners of the videogame canon.

It's a game that draws heavily on the genre's historical roots, placing the solid gameplay mechanics of seminal titles *Ogre Battle* and *Final Fantasy Tactics* at its core. But it's clear from the off that it shares neither benchmarks' flair for watertight mythology or narrative flourish; while at its heart the game is enticing, enjoyable and compulsive in its imitation of others, it's frequently bland in its own expression of their traditions.

The player is drip-fed gameplay tools and mechanisms one by one as the hours progress, and levelling ceilings prevent rushing ahead too far. But this attempt to streamline the game towards user-friendliness is broken as Atlus stretches the narrative and gameplay arcs out to a plodding tempo for no good reason other than to force an exhausting completion time.

Likewise, too many new characters are introduced into the player's deployment by the early short, sharp subquests. As the maximum starting line-up for each area is just six players, at least four of whom are central protagonists, it hardly leaves much room to experiment unless you're willing to put in substantial time with the optional and otherwise pointless Catacombs levelling area.

The game also has an irritating habit of throwing in key boss fights immediately after another smaller encounter, without a chance to save in between. This can lead to some infuriating moments where you simply aren't strong enough to progress in the latter fight, losing up to an hour of gameplay in the restart. It's a problem SRPG developers will always struggle with: if they provide an optional levelling-up area for players to test out new additions to the squad it makes it nigh impossible to balance the game into a consistently challenging but fair experience. Nevertheless, the frustration this causes emerges as *Stella Deus*' key failure.

But its influences are so solid that, even reflected and diluted, they make for a compelling game. The whole is far greater than the subtraction of its failures would suggest, and will attract many put off by the wonderfully absurd complexities of Nippon Ichi's brazen coup. Look back into the history books and you'll see exactly where this game came from; look down the line and you see the possibilities for evolution which Nippon Ichi has started to uncover. For now, *Stella Deus* sits in between – a strange kind of limbo, but one it inhabits wholly comfortably. **[6]**

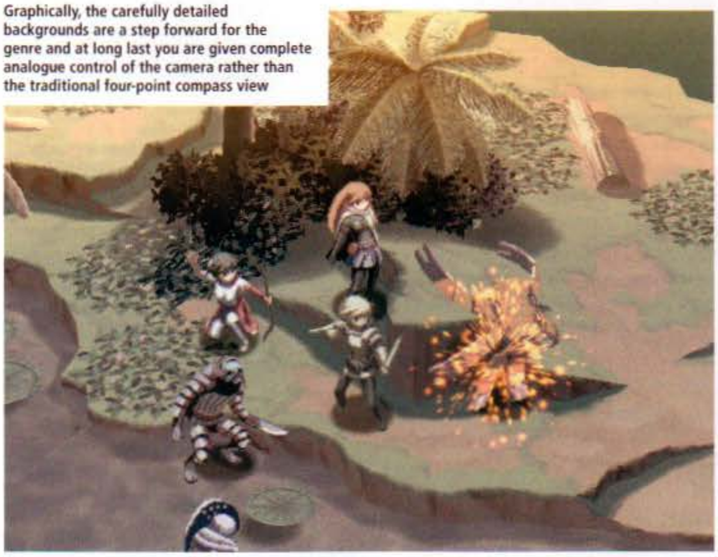






Fusion of different inventory items to create more powerful ones is encouraged – anything from new weapons and armour to new skills and attacks can be fashioned by combining any two items in the game

Graphically, the carefully detailed backgrounds are a step forward for the genre and at long last you are given complete analogue control of the camera rather than the traditional four-point compass view





Spaces for new attacks are only created when you increase ranks. However, to rank up you need a specific item for each character, which the game releases only when it wants to



The discrepancy between the length of boss health bars and those of their henchmen can be overlooked, but granting them inexplicable periods of invulnerability – presumably to force a more interesting fight pattern – is too lazy for words



Visually, the game is RenderWare at its worst, with greasy light bloom, appalling contrast balance and cardboard environments populated by moonwalking mannequins that have seemingly been carved roughly out of a bar of soap. Only the destructible elements have any hint of conviction about them



DEAD TO RIGHTS II

FORMAT: PC, PS2, XBOX (VERSION TESTED) PRICE: $50 (£27)
RELEASE: NOW (US), TBC (UK) PUBLISHER: NAMCO
DEVELOPER: WIDESCREEN GAMES

"Man's best friend. Crime's worst nightmare," growls the tagline to this sequel to 2002's middleweight thirdperson shooter. We claim little insight into the criminal mind, but it's difficult to imagine being scared of a policeman's dog who is invisible most of the time, can only turn at right angles, and is sometimes so confused by doors or corners that he freezes, caught mid-lope as a petrified statue, a retrieved firearm levitating strangely above his back. Actually, put like that, perhaps he's the stuff of nightmares after all.





Dead To Rights II's occasional sections of unarmed brawling are so simplistic and perfunctory they almost flatter the rest of the game. The button-mashing is only relieved by, occasionally, mashing a different button

It's a cheap shot, but *Dead To Rights II* is the definition of a cheap shot itself, and it deserves it. It doesn't update its predecessor so much as strip it down, removing the disliked minigames along with any pretensions to narrative, and any vestiges of charm or sophistication. What's left – a ceaseless, context-free massacre of cloned thugs – could be described as functional, but in truth, it's barely even that.

It's a shame, because there's a balanced, pleasing scheme for thirdperson gunplay at its heart. Elegantly, the colour of the lock-on target indicates range versus the accuracy of the currently equipped weapon, and determines how many shots are needed for a kill. Jack Slate's slow-motion dives grant him invulnerability and heightened accuracy for a short time, and at close range he can also perform instant disarms (actually absurd execution moves, more ballroom dancing than bullet ballet) and use enemies as human shields. Shadow, the canine criminal scourge, allows an occasional takedown from total safety.

But the automatic target selection is utterly unpredictable, and manual reselection is often haphazard. The bone-headed camera is sluggish and unwilling under player control, a problem when you can only select targets in the field of view. Hugging walls for cover requires stubborn persistence to engage, disengages randomly, and locks the view, leaving you powerless to respond to attacks from off-camera. Slate's macho refusal to reload a weapon in favour of throwing it away and using whatever else comes to hand often leaves you blasting at distant snipers with a sawn-off shotgun. Tactical play is impossible, backtracking is endemic, bad guys are buggy, Shadow is worse; it's audiovisually subnormal and you have to run into every identical door in every identical room to find out which one can be kicked down. The game is a slapdash, amateurish mess.

It would be dishonest to deny the base gratification to be had from *Dead To Rights II*. We've a right to enjoy this kind of brainless, murderous throwback, but we've also a right to expect it to be made to the standards of videogames of five years ago, never mind those of today. **[3]**





Oil barrels and vehicles can be targeted; if shot they will explode and take out any nearby perps. Similarly, Slate can pick up and toss explosive canisters at his enemies and shoot them mid-air for a destructive blast

Shadow puppetry



Given the dog's prominence in all the marketing for *Dead To Rights II*, it's shocking how poorly realised and peripheral to the action he actually is. Usually out of sight and far out of mind, he only magically materialises beside his master when issued a command. His attack is the least used and useful of Jack's abilities; he can also retrieve ammo, but only what he pleases and when it suits him (which is seldom). It's a promising concept, but in reality seems the most paper-thin and contrived of all USPs; a half-hearted stab at differentiation in an overcrowded genre.







Cole's scanner apes *Metroid Prime*'s scan visor: it unlocks Easter eggs, adds background detail to the story, and provides some slim impetus for replay and exploration – as well as giving the scriptwriters' sense of humour a welcome outlet



AREA 51

FORMAT: PC, PS2 (VERSION TESTED), XBOX **PRICE:** £40
RELEASE: OUT NOW **PUBLISHER:** MIDWAY
DEVELOPER: INEVITABLE ENTERTAINMENT **PREVIOUSLY IN:** E138

Mutant storm



Not far into the game, Cole becomes infected with the same alien virus that has broken free and devastated the base, turning its scientists into cannibalistic shotgun fodder. It affects him differently; a button press summons or suppresses a mutant form that removes his ability to use weapons, but enables a hugely powerful melee attack that replenishes mutagen. This mutagen can in turn be launched in a long-range homing blast that replenishes Cole's health when it hits home. He can also see cloaked enemies and spread his infection. It's a neat concept and a useful health top-up in tight corners, but its real purpose, and the balance between Cole's two forms, is never found.

Mere minutes into *Area 51*'s campaign, it's clear that Midway means business, and there's still no business like showbusiness. It's loud, it's pretty, it smells of money, and everything you might need to know about what you're letting yourself in for is signposted in 20-foot-high flashing neon. *Halo* and *Half-Life* are instantly invoked, as is that mother of all cinematic inspirations to videogaming, Aliens. Hero Ethan Cole's rueful voiceover has subconsciously suggested the theme of paranormal paranoia before you even recognise David Duchovny's bored drawl. As Cole's hazmat-suited specialist team is parachuted into the burning ruins of the US government's house of secrets, it's established in record time that everything has gone wrong, and nothing is as it seems.

Except, of course, everything is exactly as it seems, and not a whole lot has gone wrong. This is a simple, fast-paced and extremely solidly constructed shooter that happily sacrifices scope and ambition for polish, and wears its off-the-peg genre fashions with some flair.

Inevitable Entertainment's development mantra for *Area 51* would seem to have been 'make a little go a long way'. So you won't find a lot of variation in the labs, hangars, and trashed, rubble-strewn institutional corridors of the covert complex, but you will find them convincingly textured, and dramatically lit. The suite of firearms won't impress you with its size, innovation or imagination, but each one will impress you with its bark and punch, painstakingly realised down to the exceptional feedback from the pad rumble.

Nor will you detect many new faces or much combat intelligence among the ranks of snarling zombie mutations, skittering critters, and enigmatic goggled stormtroopers that pick off Cole's teammates in short order, and assault him for every step of his bloodthirsty quest for truth. There are depressingly few portraits in this shooting gallery, and it's haunted by the ghost of Midway's undistinguished arcade shoot 'em up of the same name. But great showman it is, Inevitable hustles the player through it with clearly marked objectives, impeccably stage-managing enemy placement and attacks, and springing set-piece moments (not least one utterly magnificent sight gag).

With the notable but rather underexploited exception of Cole's ability to mutate at will (see 'Mutant storm'), *Area 51* is entirely without inspiration, an exercise in slick, crowd-pleasing cookie-cutter cliché from the Jerry Bruckheimer school of entertainment manufacture. It is absolutely not bad, almost never broken (apart from the occasional zero-health checkpoint save debacle), and usually a good deal of fun. But you can't help but wish Inevitable had tinkered with its gaming sources with at least some of the irreverent glee with which it compiled its kitchen-sink compendium of conspiracy theories. **[6]**



Some weapons of the same sort are automatically dual-wielded when you come across another, even (to extremely destructive effect) the shotgun. You'll drop the second as soon as you need two hands to reload, however, so it's a temporary power-up rather than a tactical choice







Splitscreen and online multiplayer are catered for by a multitude of maps, some of them good, most of them indistinguishable. The frontend is cumbersome and confusing, but it's a capable deathmatch game



Audio design is of the same high standard as the visual effects, particularly in the accompaniment to mutant form. It's the weedy techno that lets the side down



To confront a gun-toting aggressor at this range would be suicide were he actually in possession of a gun, a clue what he's doing, or any of the other faculties that this game's characters apparently happily survive without







Arnold Vosloo, star of The Mummy, resembles a bewildered old man in *Boiling Point*. From a firstperson perspective, his/your walking animation takes realism to the point of exaggeration, yet still seems incapable of climbing a flight of stairs without juddering like Wile E Coyote on earthquake pills



BOILING POINT: ROAD TO HELL

FORMAT: PC PRICE: £35 RELEASE: OUT NOW PUBLISHER: ATARI DEVELOPER: DEEP SHADOWS PREVIOUSLY IN: E144, E149

It's hard to decide whether *Boiling Point* more closely resembles an Ed Wood interpretation of Commando or a nightmare in the style of Don't Look Now, where nothing seems correct and the overwhelming urge is to turn tail and flee to the likes of *Far Cry*, *GTA* or the comparative funfair of your desktop. A malfunctioning travesty, it demolishes PC gaming's dubious tradition of applauding technical ambition above all else with all the grace of a narcoleptic piling face first through a coffee table.

Deep Shadows has engaged in a straight one-upmanship contest with the sandbox genre, doing so on such a bluntly numerical basis that, as the game's canvas is stretched to a dizzying 625 square kilometres, it tears apart the delicately balanced patchwork that earlier games have sewn into place. Though the basic geometry of its buildings and terrain is decent, the point where the ambition eclipses the developer's abilities is soon reached to massively detrimental effect.

South America, as depicted here, is a world where cars and people frequently fail to navigate even the most basic paths, where objects and furniture adopt almost random proportions, and where harassed NPCs are often seen to run aimlessly back and forth while emitting an unearthly, sexually ambiguous howl. Where the wide-scale demographic should suggest dynamism and variety, instead it depicts countless repetitions of the same model. Police stations, military encampments and, to a large degree, the streets themselves present a genuine attack of the clones – endless parades of lifeless, ethnic stereotypes with yapping mouths and little to say that's of interest or worth.

Moreover, the game isn't even close to realising an adequate set of rules or a consistent pattern of play. The allegiance system, devised to instil strategy in your choice of missions, is reduced to farce by the game's random incompetencies. Further pedantic, statistics-based roleplaying elements emerge throughout, but feel equally redundant in a context where none of the key components are enjoyable.

The driving of ground vehicles, for example, is laughably awkward. Between a constrained camera, risible engine noise and unpredictable handling, they and their equivalents on sea and in the air are a chore to operate. Weapons are similarly joyless, acting solely as a mechanism for slaying adversaries and never drawing from them the immoral rush that put them in videogames in the first place. The developer has taken videogaming's toys du jour and redrafted them into a particularly naive brief – one that's incapable of grasping that most fundamental notion that quantity and quality aren't one and the same.

Irresistible plays on *Boiling Point*'s title, such as the likelihood of both the player and their graphics card very quickly reaching a temperature where their sanity and warranty are respectively annihilated, sadly ring true. All of the intended connotations, however, remain hopelessly inappropriate to the game at hand: a cold and flawed sandbox shooter, a rudimentary RPG and, for most, an almost unplayable experience. **[2]**





Faced with the intricate layout of a straight line, the drivers of *Boiling Point*'s vehicles often fold beneath the pressure, veering sideways and becoming stuck in a one-sided battle with stubborn roadside objects

Streaming pile of...



***Boiling Point*'s big claim that, once underway, it would present no loading bars to the player has been realised. But with the achievement comes a caveat that frequently negates its appeal. Those required loading times, it quickly emerges, haven't been slipped beneath the game's exterior with quite the degree of fluidity suggested. This much-touted streaming engine, in fact, is enough to make all but the most towering of towers buckle beneath its weight, frequently grinding and skipping with little apparent regard for its slider-configured settings. This would be less of an issue were the world being rendered at least ten times less repetitive.**

Force Heal becomes crucial in the later stages even though it does leave you vulnerable to attack. It can often result in comedic situations where you're constantly fleeing from enemies to find a 'safe' corner







Anakin's crackling lightning attack comes only when he moves over to the dark side, yet it's odd the game represents the Force with an energy bar. Clearly the project was rushed to make it out prior to the movie



STAR WARS EPISODE III: REVENGE OF THE SITH

FORMAT: PS2, XBOX PRICE: £30 RELEASE: OUT NOW
PUBLISHER: LUCASARTS DEVELOPER: THE COLLECTIVE

If there's one thing director George Lucas improved in the years between the original Star Wars film trilogy and the prequels, it's the lightsaber battles. Paunchy stuntmen with capes and white sticks were replaced with balletic martial arts experts performing beautifully choreographed violence against a backdrop made from the latest digital technology. And it's here that *Star Wars Episode III: Revenge Of The Sith* should score highly, judging by the game's impressive showreels.

Sadly, there's a gulf of difference between what it's like to watch and what it's like to play. The camera is so stubborn – choosing the most dramatic angle to show the action, rather than the most practical – that it's difficult not to conclude that it was blueprinted in from the beginning. It's not a clumsy or unintelligent camera per se – no, the effect is completely intentional, which doesn't make it any the less annoying, particularly during the copious bouts of running blindly into the screen.

Using the *Lord Of The Rings* games as inspiration, *Revenge Of The Sith* takes you through individual encounters from the movie, interspersing and segueing from film clip to cut-scene to gameplay in masterful fashion. But that's the only thing it does with elegance: everything else is as random as a broken blaster.

At its heart it's a combat game, and the combat can be momentarily intense and captivating but usually dissolves into imprecision, inevitably encouraging button mashing. The block works intermittently, the side-step is ineffective, and critical strikes on prone foes sometimes don't even hit home.

It's a game that makes you desperately want to feel like a Jedi, arcing your lightsaber across the screen, ducking under attacks, parrying counters and going in for the kill, but the subtlety just isn't there.

The Force abilities are better: they increase the combat options and provide engaging interludes. Force-pushing droids, playing Jedi mind tricks on Clone soldiers and deflecting laser blasts back at turret guns and the prototype AT-ST walkers provide some of the more satisfying moments in the game. It's also gratifying to see minor details from the prequels make it in as integral gameplay components, such as Qui-Gon Jinn's method for unlocking a blast door with a lightsaber – taken from The Phantom Menace.

The greatest pleasure is experiencing Anakin Skywalker's descent into the dark side before the movie is even in the cinema. But by the time you read this that will be redundant, and it's a weak selling point for a game that fails to capture the elegance and tingle of Jedi combat. **[4]**







Some levels are gorgeous, although the action taking place in the background is often more entrancing than the close-quarters combat. Throwing your lightsaber at a foe is a good way to keep them at a distance

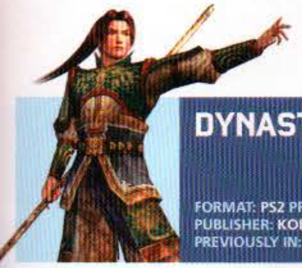
Trilogy tribute



From distributing skill points in post-level menus through to the 'fair', 'good', 'impressive' and 'masterful' multipliers, *Revenge Of The Sith* unashamedly rips off the template laid down by Electronic Arts' *Lord Of The Rings* trilogy. There are movie-based bonus rewards to unlock, too, but they're nowhere near as captivating as the interviews and clips EA put together for *LOTR*. Here, you get paltry concept art and bonus levels that feel every bit as if they were grudgingly added by a team with a deadline to meet. Attacking hordes of droids and Clone soldiers in a cave as General Grievous does not make for a memorable bonus.



Some blast doors can be opened by severing electronic circuitry; others require the more direct method of burning through with a lightsaber. It's not difficult and is one of the game's more successful touches



DYNASTY WARRIORS 5

FORMAT: PS2 PRICE: £40 RELEASE: JUNE 24
PUBLISHER: KOEI DEVELOPER: OMEGA FORCE
PREVIOUSLY IN: E148

The fifth in the *Dynasty Warriors* series is a game tarnished by fear. Recently released in Japan and the US, it's another commercial phenomenon – but seems burdened by the commercial success of its predecessors, as though Koei's fear of altering a winning formula holds it back from ever achieving greatness.

Anything published by Koei with the *Dynasty Warriors* tag casually ratchets up a million units plus, even as other long-lasting videogame series stagnate and become unpopular with the buying public. *Dynasty Warriors 5* is, however, a disappointment because it simply can't move on.

The blend of strategy – or rather, one part tactics and nine parts melée combat – is still as muscular and mesmerising as ever. Once you start a campaign and see the body count rising as you sweep ten, 15, sometimes 20 enemies off their feet with a whirling combo, it's difficult not to get drawn in. But the formula is as crusty as a soldier's old boot and the main criticism still stands: why bother, when the evolution between this and the last title is infinitesimal?

The bodyguard system has been enhanced, so your sidekicks get stuck in rather than dawdling around like bored thugs. Meanwhile the



The flair and fury of massed battle has as strong an appeal as ever, but – even with the marked graphical improvement that *Dynasty Warriors 5* offers – you can't escape the sense of déjà vu

stronghold feature, which raises troop morale when enemy compounds are overthrown, has been improved. But it's scant reward for a year's wait. It's also deflating to discover that the extra strategic depth provided by the Empires mode in *Dynasty Warriors 4: Empires* has been dropped altogether.

The maps are bigger, the armies are larger, and more heroes, weapons and items have been added, but the fundamental hack'n'slash mechanics haven't moved on.

It's difficult not to make this review sound like a tick list, but that's apparently the route Koei took when it came to a decision on how to take the franchise forward. Ironically, this series is unlikely to blossom until its popularity wanes and Koei stops being afraid to change it. **[5]**



***Dynasty Warriors* now has an impressive roster of 48 characters, each with their own combos and weapon nuances. A Three Kingdoms encyclopaedia, with pages of information about each general and battle, also deepens the experience but everything in it is communicated in flat, uninspiring prose**

SMART BOMB

DANGER! UNEXPLODED BOMB

FORMAT: PSP PRICE: $40 (£22) RELEASE: OUT NOW (US), TBC (UK)
PUBLISHER: EIDOS DEVELOPER: CORE DESIGN



It's *Logo*, only less amphibious – this puzzle requires the player to program a droid to navigate a maze by placing instruction cards in the right sequence. It gets progressively more complex as the levels advance



***Smart Bomb* has the misfortune of following *Mercury's* act with its own labyrinth of tilting puzzles. Though the mazes themselves employ attractive circuitry-themed scenery and objectives, they lack all of the silky-smooth analogue finesse of their indirect predecessor**

As a member of the Global Defense Network's highly trained and elite Bomb Disposal Unit, the task before you is clear: arrive on location at a site where an unknown terrorist cell has planted an AI-enhanced bomb, and use your skills to effectively defuse it before its timer reaches zero. The clock is ticking away frantically, pressure is mounting exponentially, and it's at precisely this moment that you rue the day you had oven mitts surgically grafted over your hands. This is the *Smart Bomb* experience.

What's most frustrating about *Smart Bomb* is not the brutal, near insurmountable challenge its story mode presents (though that ranks a very close second), it's that accompanying the deluge of expletives that inevitably follows yet another game-over explosion is the undeniable sense that it just didn't have to be this way. *Smart Bomb* very effectively creates a sensible and compelling world in which it wraps its puzzles – which themselves include a number of inventive and otherwise highly gratifying designs – but unforgivably unresponsive controls and a series of poor structural choices quickly reveal themselves and deeply undercut every positive point the game provides.

To help lessen the constant sense of urgency invoked by the bomb's timer, random power-ups appear in all the puzzles to add a sliver of extra time or the chance to bypass the puzzle altogether, but more often than not acquiring the power-ups means undoing progress on the puzzle already made, or going far out of your way to create the conditions to collect them. In an atmosphere where every fractional-second counts, and where grappling with the interface is already a challenge in itself, this artificially induced risk-and-reward system comes off more as sarcasm than salvation. This sense of cynicism is also readily apparent in puzzles where the means of testing your solution requires a arbitrary charge-up time always a hair's breadth longer than you inevitably give it, and in stages that automatically begin to unravel themselves the moment when they've just come under control.

There is a razor-fine balance between mollycoddling and mercilessness that must be struck in any good puzzle game, and a progression that allows the player to come to grips with the rules on their terms, but on every count *Smart Bomb* errs on the side of ruthlessness. Taking this lump, combined with molasses-thick and overly cumbersome control, leaves *Smart Bomb* solely as one for the masochists. **[3]**


PlayStation 2
POLICE
POLICE

TIME EXTEND

GRAND THEFT AUTO III

FORMAT: **PC, PS2, XBOX**
PUBLISHER: **ROCKSTAR**
DEVELOPER: **IN-HOUSE (ROCKSTAR NORTH)**
ORIGIN: **UK**
RELEASE DATE: **2001**



It's a crime-ridden cesspit of corruption and sleaze. So how did Liberty City become the unofficial capital of the land of videogames?

Nobody expected *Grand Theft Auto III*. Even though it was to become the very definition of a massmarket game by virtue of the sheer weight of its sales, its pre-launch momentum was practically zero.

For everyone who wasn't Rockstar, *GTA III* just happened. Six months later, Videogame City had a new Mr Big. It became, arguably, the flagship brand for the PlayStation2 – a role typically reserved for a firstparty production. It's given publishers and developers inspiration for lucrative hits and has been used as a baseball bat by political opportunists with which to beat videogames they allege to be a threat to social stability.

It's reassuring that something so unheralded could become such a significant success. It seemingly triumphed without having to resort to blanket marketing and coercion. Pretty much any title can manoeuvre itself into the spotlight by fair means or foul, but to stay there takes a game of quality. The ideas and structure of *GTA III* didn't just mesmerise gamers, they fascinated a significant portion of the industry itself. Yeah, nobody expected *GTA III* but, thankfully, that didn't stop it from being welcomed.

Super Mario 64 took an existing genre and made it 3D; *GTA III* took 3D and made it into its own genre. Is it fair to call a mixture of wonderful driving and poor gunplay its own new genre? Maybe not. But *GTA III*'s fingerprints go much deeper than that – which is probably why, in an industry unhealthily obsessed with successful rip-offs, nobody but Rockstar North has yet managed to leapfrog it.

Most games hold your hand from start to finish; *GTA III* takes that hand just long enough to press into it the keys to the city. After that, you're left to your own devices

The game's vitality came down to three key ingredients, elements that allowed the free-roaming nature of the gameworld to come alive like very few others: cars, culture and continuity.

There's no game-over screen and no title screen. Failing a mission never breaks the illusion of the gameworld; it just carries on regardless. Get your character killed or arrested and he'll just be delivered straight back to the streets. Most games slice their worlds up into stages, bracketed by menus and loading screens but, although *GTA III*'s world has been created for the player, it doesn't revolve around you. Whereas many titles see the developer taking you by the hand and holding on as tight as possible from start to finish, *GTA III* takes that hand for just long enough to press into it



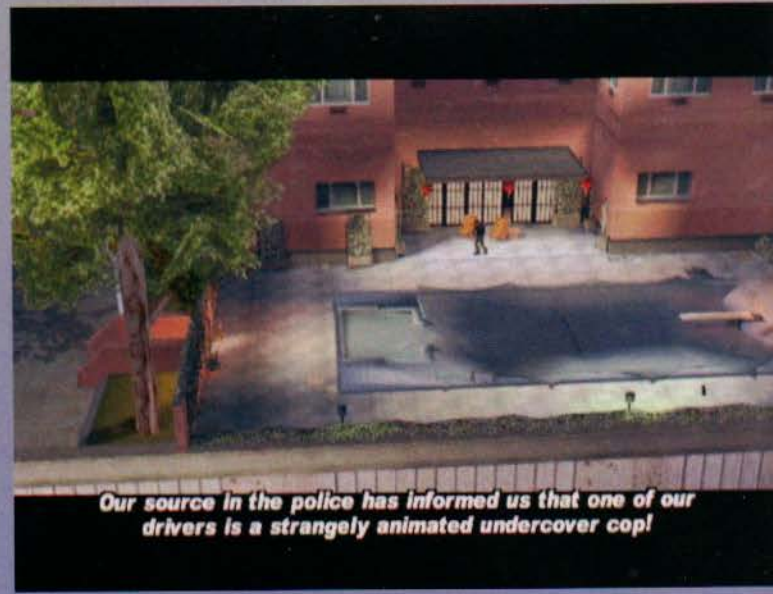
TREASURE DROVE

GTA III's freedom is so smooth thanks to Rockstar North nailing something crucial to the experience – the vehicles. They're fundamental in giving the player the mobility to move through what seems like such a huge space without ever becoming hamstrung by its size. A well-pitched blend of unfussiness and detail, every car feels just slightly different, enough to make the player favour certain options over others but not so much to prevent any vehicle being a useful getaway in a sticky situation. Not too realistic, not too throwaway, they're uncomplicated to control but still subtle enough for there to be a noticeable difference between braking and handbraking, while a moderate damage model succeeded in making players wince with each crash, and bail out once flames started spewing from the bonnet. Subsequent *GTA*s, and the irrepressible range of vehicles debuted in each, are just as successful in getting this balance right.





Ramps dotted throughout the city would, when hit at speed, slow the game down and flick the camera to a grander angle to capture the stunt. Players could gleefully honk the horn, often blissfully unaware of just what would happen when the vehicle crashed back down to the ground, where they'd receive a rating based on acrobatics



the keys to the city. After that, you're left to your own devices, contact limited to a small tutorial pop-up window when the situation calls for it.

At time of launch, this was liberty on a scale that console gamers had rarely been presented with, and never in such a readily identifiable fashion. *GTA III*'s setting, Liberty City, is a place where invisible walls are extinct, and where progression is an option, not an obligation. Sandbox, toy set, playground – whatever you call it, it's an effective lure, allowing game breaking, improvisation and DIY player-created chaos. It felt like a release from captivity, without a creator towering over you and coaxing you down a series of glorified tunnels. No wonder people revelled in such freedom.

But the liberation was, by construction, a loaded deal. Improvised behaviour is a boon when it's a means to no end whatsoever, but it makes for a schizophrenic difficulty curve. One mission might pass in a pathetic breeze as your target is accidentally run down by some aggressive traffic. The next might be a hellish, dispiriting experience in which your meticulous and lengthy plan collapses thanks to a nearby policeman deciding to intervene at just the wrong moment.

But however frustrating these moments become, it's hard to stay discouraged. Spend 20 minutes just cruising around Liberty City, cooling off and goofing about, and a brand new (and this time, guaranteed foolproof) scheme will hatch in your head. OK, so the idea of a foolproof plan is almost ridiculous in *GTA III* – preparation is about as reliable a tactic as pushing your luck – but this emergence is key to maintaining a powerful illusion, even if it risks discouraging some players from ever advancing through the plot.

It's responsible for the spread of something far more insidious than any moral crusader would notice: hard-to-collect collectibles, a concept formerly quarantined to RPGs

This is grow-your-own gameplay, an organic set-piece editor just begging to be exploited and taunted, and which could just as easily rebel and maul you when asked to behave. A similar relationship is at work behind the game's surprisingly excessive depths, too: the hidden packages, the unique stunt jumps, the odd jobs, the Easter eggs. While *GTA III* never demands the player conduct a serious combing of the game's environment, it's still ready for it.

Gamers have been trained to



While the streams of pedestrians gave *GTA III* an unmistakable sense of bustle, there's little variety in the make-up of individual bystanders. That repetition was unimportant, however, when you could begin to identify the region you were in within the game just by looking at the locals



GTA III and its follow-ups are more enjoyable when played through for a second time. The player, now worldly wise, can cut a far more confident path through the world, with hindsight helping to minimise frustration

expect a shiny reward for uncovering a hidden nook or knocking down a suspiciously cracked wall. *GTA III*'s venous network of back alleys and side streets, though, have no guarantee of rewards. That only makes it all the more exciting when something is unearthed, however, even if it's just a body armour pick-up or a hit of the fictional drug Spank, a narcotic that affords the player superhuman strength, slows the game world and turns sound effects from beeps and yells into foghorns and whale song.

It is this aspect of the game that has been responsible for the spread of something far more insidious than any moral crusader would notice: hard-to-collect collectibles.

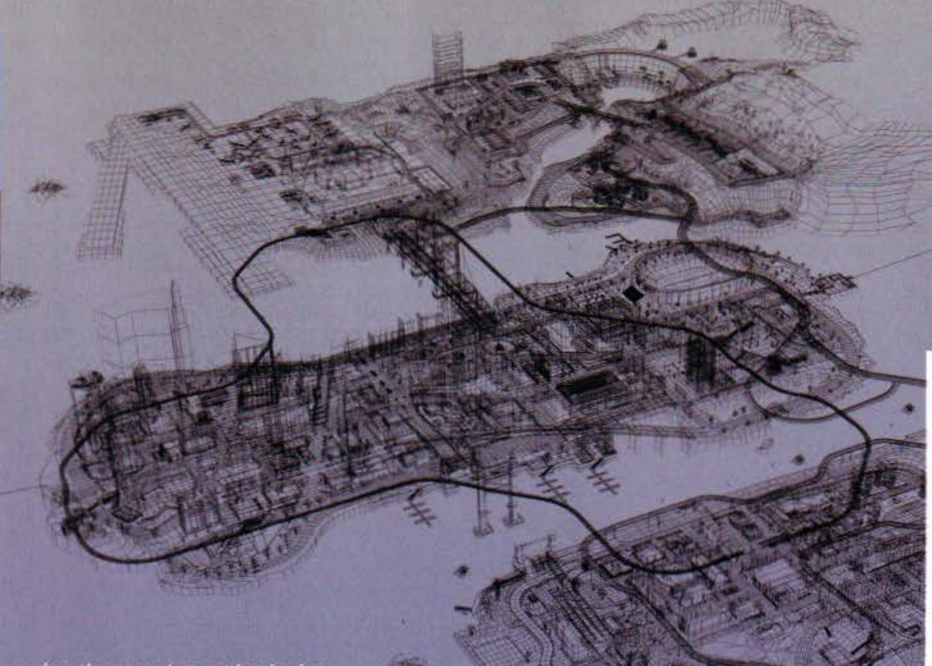
Most visitors to Liberty City inevitably stumble on a good number of the 100 hidden packages dotted throughout the city. With every ten collected, a new resource – guns or body armour, for example – is made available for free at your safe house. But the idea of finding them all without a magazine walkthrough perched on your knee or an FAQ browsed online is an astronomical demand, one only approachable by those with excellent map-making skills or several million hours to spare.

It's a concept that was formerly quarantined to RPGs but is now rife in modern videogames, a deadly percentage-completion predator masquerading as extra lifespan. Three of last year's games – *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas*, *Mercenaries* and *Spider-Man 2* – all contained a wealthy range of collectibles dotted around their environments, but featured no in-game mechanism to help you to find them and no aid to dedicated players who want to see every little thing within this game they've become so smitten with. Of course, it's a joy to stumble across something completely unexpected and not signposted, a true reward for investigation. But the flipside is an inescapable worry that you're not seeing the game's most intriguing secrets – and the side effect of falling in love with any videogame is that you can't help but want to.

GTA III has become the greatest advert for official game guides since *Final Fantasy*, encouraging a culture of compulsory spoon-feeding. For all of *GTA III*'s sophistication, it palls when compared to the user-friendly structure of discovery and exploration presented in, say, the *Ratchet & Clank* series. But that's a tarnish that gamers only ever stumbled upon when it was too late, when they were too deeply entranced to protest. One of *GTA*'s vital talents, and one often lost on any number of clones, is that it managed to make culture and geekery coexist.

It's rendered in realism that's recognisable enough for the game to seep steadily and smoothly into a casual consciousness, but detailed and broad enough to keep seasoned players absorbed. It's a ready-made kickabout of an experience, action as instant as your virtual aggression but that offers a roleplaying level of depth for anyone seeking it. A free fold-out map that came in the box emphasised this, although it could just as likely have been compensation for the inexcusable oversight that is the lack of a global in-game map. That said, forcing you to familiarise yourself directly with Liberty City is yet another double-edged sword – a demanding requirement but one that pushes the game deeper into your memory, and you deeper into the game.

That sense of location can't be overestimated, and it helps explain why subsequent games in the *GTA* series dropped their numerals and instead used their settings as subtitles – the equally unsalubrious neighbourhoods of Vice City and San



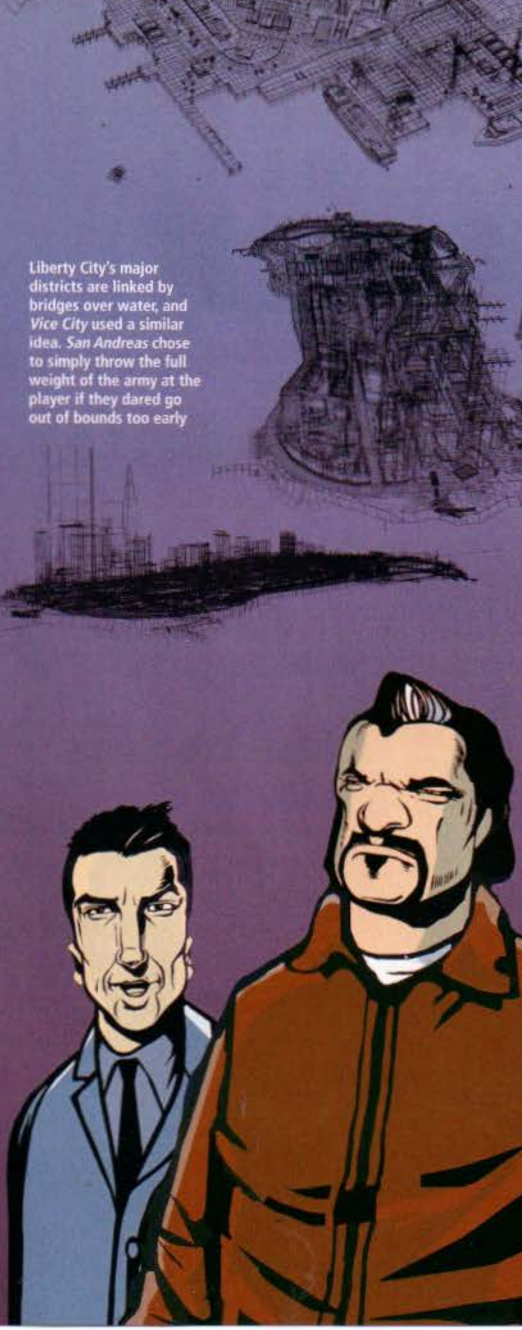
Liberty City's major districts are linked by bridges over water, and *Vice City* used a similar idea. *San Andreas* chose to simply throw the full weight of the army at the player if they dared go out of bounds too early



SIM CITIES

Just a year after *Grand Theft Auto III*, *GTA: Vice City* struck the PlayStation2, a contrast to its predecessor both in terms of its garish look and the fact that the lead character actually had a voice. A camp neon cartoon next to the grime of *GTA III*, and one of few games to claim pink as its trademark colour, *Vice City* perhaps does more to ram home the strengths of the series than *GTA III* or the next instalment, *GTA: San Andreas*. A heavyweight licensed soundtrack offers the perfect retro resonance for 20-somethings and carries the torch for the series' magnificent audio design. *Vice City*'s game world is strangely flat, but this is countered by the use of bikes and helicopters – making up for the bland topography by giving the player even more degrees of freedom. *San Andreas* sees *GTA* turning its eye to the early '90s and feeding off its culture just as voraciously, even if the actual result isn't as attractive as *Vice City*'s plundering of the '80s. It increases the series' scope – from the size of the world, to the intimidating range of collectibles – even further, without losing its trademark immersion.









One of the most questionable aspects of *GTA*'s morality is one that never gets questioned – the fact that the player is rewarded with a little money for crashing their vehicle into another. Still, it's just as questionable that anyone in *GTA III* could be thought of as innocent; the rumoured 'Sin City' tag for *San Andreas* seems as apt



SAYONARA, SALVATORE

The missions in *Grand Theft Auto III* often allow players to bring their own strategies to the fore, but one in particular demands it: Sayonara Salvatore. A communal sticking point for plenty of players, this tricky sub-plot closes the story strand for the first island just as you take residence on the second. You must travel from one to the other under a time limit to eliminate a target that appears for a scant few seconds before being whisked off with a well-armed escort to a refuge just up the road. As well as being your first true test of patience, it's likely to be the first true test of your ingenuity, too. Try to find a cosy sniping point from a nearby rooftop? Construct a ramshackle barricade from passing cars at the end of the street? Try for a full-frontal assault? Block the path between hideout and escort by jamming a truck in the way? None are guaranteed to work, of course, but each one is likely to yield different results for different players.





Despite the series' ties with modern culture, its art style has always been cartoon-like, striking and iconic, making for vivid boxart

Andreas. *GTA III* is the very definition of urban, more than any amount of bling-heavy aspiration and celebrity involvement. *Need For Speed Underground* feels like an out-of-place pop video by comparison.

GTA III wasn't about the power of brand recognition and glorified merchandising. It had no significant licences, no big-name anything; almost everything was home-grown. Of course, inspiration was drawn from the real world, from movies, music and identifiable products, but *GTA III* didn't need manufacturer-faithful vehicles for its cars to feel varied and recognisable. And, arguably, the curious names (Banshee, Patriot, Cheetah, Dodo and the rest) afforded to the motley gathering of automobiles only reinforced Liberty City's coherence and bolstered its validity as a make-believe metropolis.

But despite all this, *GTA III* wasn't about realism. It was about caricature, capturing the essence of urban society with attention to detail but never getting bogged down in it. This gave way to the most fundamental and immediate slapstick of all: violence.

The violence is comedic, over the top, and, for many, the videogame equivalent of a post-watershed You've Been Framed. Without that character and excess, the action that *GTA III* offers would have been hard to enjoy.

Its gunplay is famously dreadful, hampered by an unreliable and confusing lock-on, and glitches and rough edges abound throughout the game. Park a car, turn away from it, and there's no guarantee it won't have vanished when you turn back, for example. But there was always enough going on, enough clockwork life marching on around the player, to swiftly detract from it. And despite the hefty number of missions – 73 in all, not including the peripheral rampage, package, stunt and garage collection tasks – there was enough

Nearly four years on, few games can match *GTA III*'s sense of raw fun, ripe ambition and articulation of freedom. Its shockwaves are still rippling through the ground





Scrapes with the police (right) were as entertaining as they were deadly, as Liberty City's finest displayed a wild disregard for anyone's safety. Often, the player just had to stay out of the way as they indulged in a heavy bout of self-harm







A six-star Wanted Level system of law enforcement was a videogame within itself, with increased provocation from the player causing ever more aggressive forms of lawgivers to appear. The helicopters and armoured police vans of a three-star rating made the idea of activating a six-star assault too challenging to resist



variety, as much in the player's approach as the game's own parameters, to keep its anatomy ticking over.

The ambience of urban life is captured vividly. We've had the rain fall and the sun set on us plenty of times in games like *Shenmue* and *Zelda: The Ocarina Of Time*, but while they were prettier, they didn't feel anywhere near as moody and isolated. The environmental variety in the districts of Liberty City – the hemmed-in flatness of Staunton Island, the steep and winding hills of Shoreside Vale – did as much to reinforce a sense of place as the wealth of generic landmarks.

Plus, *GTA III* was host to a huge range of believable social reactions and behaviours among its populace. Gun someone down on the street and half the passers-by will run away in terror; the other half sprint *towards* the body, gathering around it and muttering among themselves. It's simple, but very effective. Mugging and car-jacking happens at random, implying that it also takes place when you're not there to see it. Pedestrians stroll and amble, some of them accompanied by the tinny beats of a set of headphones. Fire engines and ambulances appear on the scene of a suitable emergency, and even the prostitute-health quirk has a sense of amusing logic about it.

The morality of such features – and *GTA III* in general – is an entire discussion in itself, but it's as hard to condone the carefree slaughter of prostitutes and pedestrians as it is to berate it for being a choice, and one that's obviously virtual and framed within a world that's built upon, and breeds, corruption. Still, there's identifiable and irrefutable real-life culture represented here, which is why it finds such a quick identity with players and becomes such a prime target for those who rail against the existence of violent games.

Culture in videogames is, even in the production-heavy climes of today, still a sore spot and one that's rarely tackled with any amount of grace. Too often, dialogue is idiotic; too many characters are clumsy cardboard rejects and come across as contrived funnels for gameplay delivery. By comparison, *GTA III* still seems brave.

Quite rightly, it assumed an iconoclastic amount of cultural experience on behalf of its prospective audience, attributing to it a knowledge that goes beyond videogames and has significant experience of cinema and music. And while the script and voice acting occasionally felt cheesy, they were never insulting. Admittedly, it doesn't zing society as well and as often as do *Vice City* and *San Andreas*, but it did manage to land a blow that seemed almost illegal: taking the mickey out of a rival game, and doing it well.

Plenty of games make reference to one another, but few of them sling any mud – and none with such accuracy as *GTA III*. Its biggest jibe was the Two-Faced Tanner mission, a bid to eliminate a 'strangely animated' cop who was 'more or less useless outside of his car'. With said character's unmistakable resemblance to *Driver*'s lead character Tanner, this was clearly a direct stab at *Driver 2*, a PlayStation title that could well have superseded *GTA III* if not for the fact that *Driver 2*'s on-foot sections weren't much cop. With the Liberty City mission culminating in Tanner being murdered, it's perhaps the series' most brutal lampoon yet, beyond the *Metropolis Street Racer* riff to be found in *Vice City* or the *Driver 3* and *True Crime* mockeries in *San Andreas*.

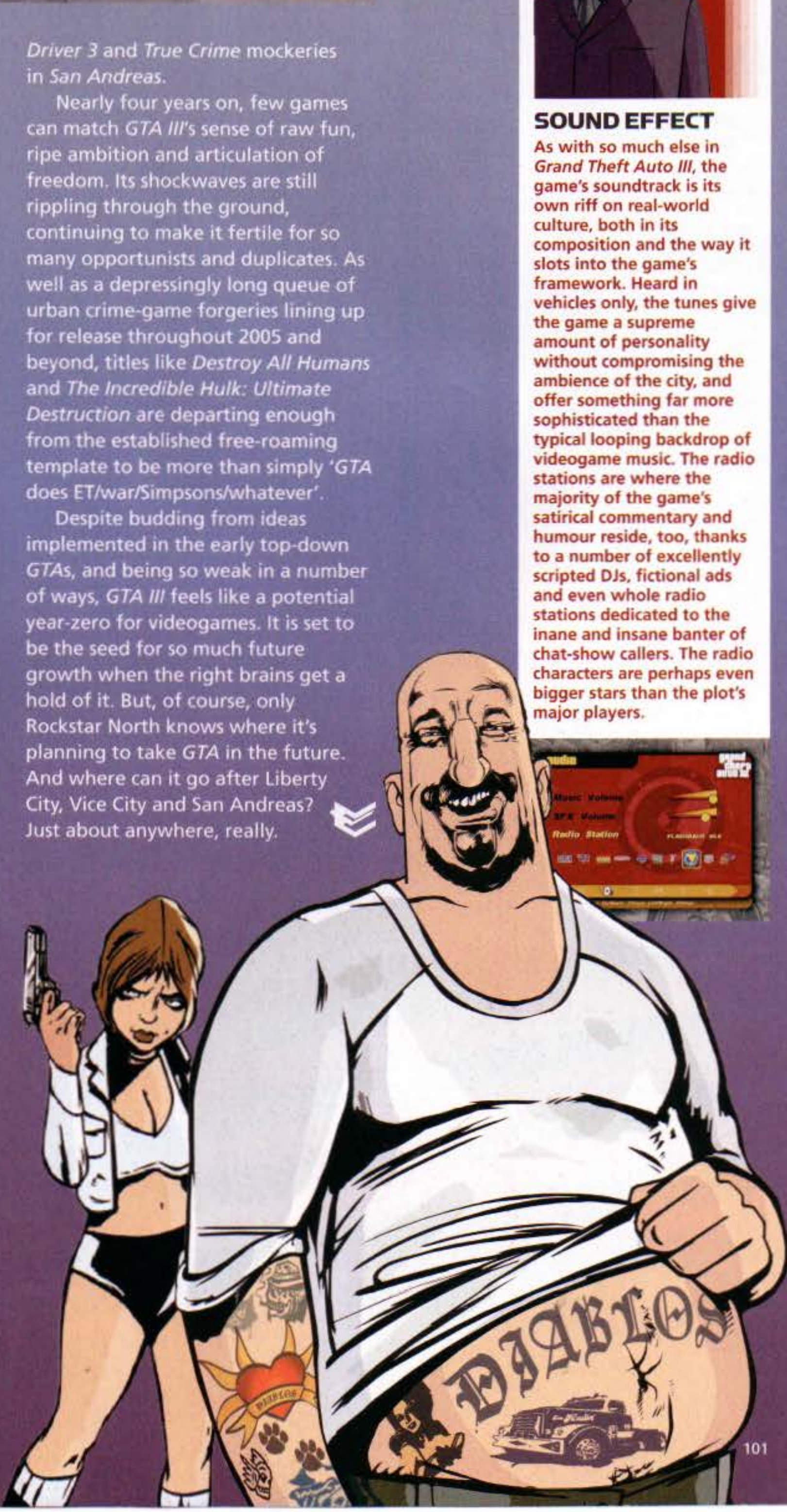
Nearly four years on, few games can match *GTA III*'s sense of raw fun, ripe ambition and articulation of freedom. Its shockwaves are still rippling through the ground, continuing to make it fertile for so many opportunists and duplicates. As well as a depressingly long queue of urban crime-game forgeries lining up for release throughout 2005 and beyond, titles like *Destroy All Humans* and *The Incredible Hulk: Ultimate Destruction* are departing enough from the established free-roaming template to be more than simply '*GTA* does ET/war/Simpsons/whatever'.

Despite budding from ideas implemented in the early top-down *GTA*s, and being so weak in a number of ways, *GTA III* feels like a potential year-zero for videogames. It is set to be the seed for so much future growth when the right brains get a hold of it. But, of course, only Rockstar North knows where it's planning to take *GTA* in the future. And where can it go after Liberty City, Vice City and San Andreas? Just about anywhere, really.



SOUND EFFECT

As with so much else in *Grand Theft Auto III*, the game's soundtrack is its own riff on real-world culture, both in its composition and the way it slots into the game's framework. Heard in vehicles only, the tunes give the game a supreme amount of personality without compromising the ambience of the city, and offer something far more sophisticated than the typical looping backdrop of videogame music. The radio stations are where the majority of the game's satirical commentary and humour reside, too, thanks to a number of excellently scripted DJs, fictional ads and even whole radio stations dedicated to the inane and insane banter of chat-show callers. The radio characters are perhaps even bigger stars than the plot's major players.





All concept art by Gary Winnick, courtesy of Ron Gilbert

THE MAKING OF... MANIAC MANSION

It may have been inspired by bad horror movies, but LucasArts' humorous title spawned a new generation of adventure games

ORIGINAL FORMAT: **C64** PUBLISHER: **LUCASARTS** DEVELOPER: **IN-HOUSE** ORIGIN: **US** RELEASE DATE: **1987**

It would be pleasing if **Ron Gilbert**'s career path was as capricious and convoluted as the plots of the games created with his ground-breaking SCUMM engine. Instead, it seems slightly conservative: his time at school spent creating small games lead up to a C64 BASIC extension for advanced graphics manipulation that earnt him a six-month stint at Human Engineered Software (HESware), programming games that would never see the light of day. Through an acquaintance there, he progressed to Lucasfilm Games (later LucasArts) and a job porting the company's early Atari 800 games to the C64. But his first commercial product – *Maniac Mansion* – was anything but conservative. Reshaping the very core of the prolific adventure game genre, its specifically designed Script Creation Utility for Maniac Mansion engine evolved such a charismatic, inimitably creative vibe that it would invent a new subgenre defined by many simply as 'LucasArts adventures'.

Mansion would fire the imaginations of all who embraced it, inspiring a TV sitcom and proving perfect for its tailor-made technology

"The story and original idea," recalls Gilbert, "came from both **Gary Winnick** [the game's celebrated artist] and I. We both liked strange humour and were big fans of campy horror movies." Winnick concurs, narrowing the field to "teenage horror movies where the kids always split up and go off into the dark recesses of a scary location on their own. I remember the first inspirational picture I drew – an exterior of a scary house with the sign 'WARNING: TRESPASSERS WILL BE





HOUSE OF QUIRKS

If *Maniac Mansion* is built upon its developers' love of bad movies and offbeat humour, the quirky details contained within provide the anecdotes that have made it legend. The broken spiral staircase encountered early in the game, suggestive of a critical puzzle, leads nowhere and serves no purpose whatsoever. Similarly, the locked medical cabinet in Dr Fred's office can never be opened. As became the status quo for LucasArts' games, *Mansion* was littered with in-jokes, ranging from a crude poster of Ron Gilbert, an X-Wing fighter model in Weird Ed's bedroom, and a THX-1138 licence plate, to the chainsaw that was forever out of gas. The required canister could later be located, but in *Zak McCracken* – an altogether separate game.



He may threaten to suck the brains from the heads of ditzy cheerleaders, but the truth is that Dr Fred has merely allowed himself to fall under the influence of the dastardly purple meteor that landed in his back yard 20 years ago and which, when not writing its memoirs, has every intention of conquering the world

HORRIBLY MUTILATED' out front as a joke – actually made it into the final game." Though singular credit for the game's conception is often given to Gilbert, it's more properly shared between Gilbert, WInnick and programmers **David Fox** (author of *Rescue On Fractalus*) and Aric Wilmunder. "I was between projects," says Fox, "having recently completed working on *Labyrinth*. Ron asked me if I could help out for about a month, figuring that was how long it would take to script the game. It turned out this was an overly optimistic estimate. I think I was on the project for about six months, and Ron continued polishing the game after I left."

"SCUMM was a bit of an afterthought," Gilbert reveals. "I started to program the gameplay in 6502 assembly language, but soon realised that it was just too complex and I needed a scripting language. I spent a good year just working on that, before the game started to come together."

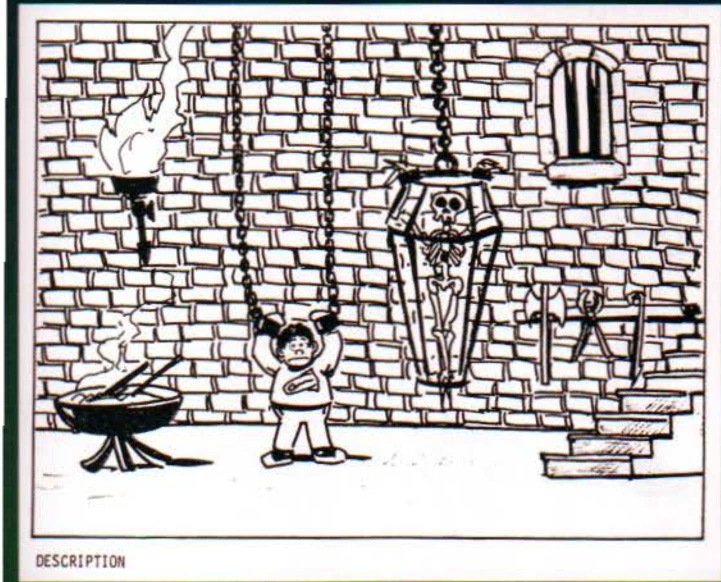
"The brilliance of SCUMM", adds Fox, "was that it allowed us to control the characters onscreen, the game logic, multitasking and more, while still working with a high-level language, one that let us write using near-English commands. And because we were working in a high-level language, it was much easier to port to other platforms." Easier, perhaps, but while its engine was undoubtedly a port engineer's dream, some would argue that the game itself was no simple conversion (see: 'SCUMM bags').



Dead Cousin Ted is one of the game's most memorable, if somewhat lifeless, characters

***Maniac Mansion*, then**, is a tale of two achievements: one of the engine that would go on, in true Purple Tentacle style, to take on and momentarily conquer the gaming world, the other being an onscreen escapade that would fire the imaginations of all who embraced it, later inspiring a TV





Unlike later LucasArts adventures, it's quite possible to die during *Maniac Mansion*. Being caught snooping around by a member of the household also results in a less permanent trip to the dungeon

sitcom and proving the perfect application, unsurprisingly, for its tailor-made technology. It chronicles the adventures of three teenagers, chosen from a variously skilled cast of seven but invariably led by class presidential candidate Dave Miller – the organiser of a mission to rescue his girlfriend Sandy from the clutches of Dr Fred Edison and his extended family of perverts, mutant freaks and, in the case of their Cousin Fred, a mummified, bespectacled corpse.

"Having multiple kids," says Fox, "and multiple combinations of kids, made the game exponentially more complex to program, test, and debug. When I designed *Zak [McKracken And The Alien Mindbenders* – his second LucasArts adventure] I kept Ron's idea of multiple characters, but I only had one combination of characters that would appear in the game. *Mansion*, on the other hand, can be played multiple times using the different combinations of kids, with many more outcomes."

Falling somewhere between Triumph Of The Nerds, Porky's and anything prefixed with the word Troma, *Mansion* was the early but accomplished blueprint for many a parodical SCUMM classic, one of which may justifiably be your all time favourite game: *The Secret of Monkey Island*, perhaps, or *Day Of The Tentacle*, *Full Throttle* or, indeed, *Mansion* itself.

Bad horror movies, Gilbert identifies, were the game's spiritual origin. "Gary and I tried to pull every cliché we could think of into the game and really make fun of the genre. Everyone in it was a stereotype. A little known fact is that most of the characters in the game are based on real people Gary and I know, but I'm not saying who for fear of reprisals." Consider it a necessary breach of the journalist code, then, that when we reveal that Razor was inspired by Winnick's girlfriend and that Dr Fred's deviant nurse wife Edna was based on Gilbert's mother, we also withhold the source of that information, saving that person the inconvenience of joining a witness protection programme even though we may now have to do so ourselves.

"Gary and I tried to pull every cliché we could think of into the game and really make fun of the genre. Everyone in it was a stereotype"

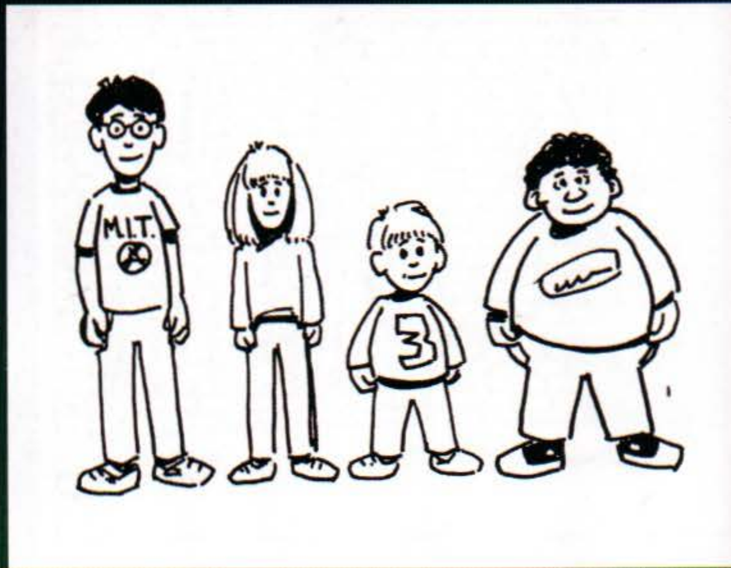
"Gary and I did a very complete design upfront," explains Gilbert, "but once programming started it was a big free-for-all. He would be doing the art and David and I would program it in, and the writing was happening as we programmed." *Maniac Mansion*, he admits, is not a model for how a project should be run. "Because I had to create the entire SCUMM system, it was about a year late, and I was not a very popular person with management for several months, but I think they believed in the project. It was also the first game that LucasArts published themselves. Before that, they were just the developer and all their games were published by companies like Activision, Atari, and Epyx, so this was a big step. A lot was riding on it."

"Initially," recalls Winnick, "Ron and I actually developed a very basic, board game-style version of the game that was playable on paper. Ron figured that if we could get that to work and it was entertaining, that we could translate that over to the computer. I don't remember all the nuances of the paper version – I mainly remember the floorplan of



The teenagers taken by the player into the mansion are no less idiosyncratic than its oddball inhabitants. Each has their own unique skills (with the possible exception of surfer Jeff) and a carefully chosen combination is essential





the mansion we developed as the 'game board'. We had a basic outline of the walls and I created acetate overlays for each level of the mansion with details of the rooms. I believe we may have also had cards representing the characters and events."

"Ron and Gary's design," Fox elaborates, "laid out the overall flow of the game. But none of the dialogue was written yet – just a rough outline of which scenes needed to happen when, and how the story was to move forward. When Ron and I began coding, we also wrote the dialogue for the characters, and choreographed their movement on the screen. I saw the art that Gary drew, and sick ideas came into my head about what to do with the objects in the rooms. My favourite was the hamster in the microwave oven. I didn't tell Ron about it ahead of time – just programmed it in and showed it to him. He loved it."

As the team's innovation crossed the boundary between storytelling and game scripting, however, one boundary in particular was shattered – that of the existing adventure game parser interface. Granting the player an essential but limited dictionary of on-screen verbs, it inspired its sub-genre's other, more defining moniker: point and click. "Soon after [writing the story]," reveals Gilbert, "I decided that I was sick and tired of text parsers".

"Ron was definitely the driving force," asserts Fox. "He'd gather all of us game designers around a computer and demonstrate the Sierra games. He'd then lead us in a discussion on their user interface and gameplay problems. It was his idea that a game should be fun to play, and shouldn't punish you for trying something you might do in the real world. For example, in one of those games, picking up a piece of broken mirror would kill you – you'd bleed to death. I know that in the real world I can successfully pick up a broken piece of mirror without dying. Designing this type of gameplay struck Ron as sadistic behaviour on the part of the programmers, who were also artificially trying to lengthen the





The game's point and click interface turned the adventure game genre on its head. Where once the challenge involved guessing the required verbs, here they were all printed on screen, their usage and interaction with objects becoming key

game by having lots of non-obvious ways to die."

"Although you were in a complete fantasy world," adds Winnick, "Ron felt that its internal logic still had to support the suspension of disbelief based on a consistent set of rules. Stupid, adventure game surprise death, where you just had to expect it around every corner, then learn by dying not to do that again when you loaded your saved game didn't make any sense to us. It was one thing if you stood under the exhaust of a rocket as a countdown was clicking away, it was another thing entirely if you're walking along minding your own business and a 16-ton weight randomly drops out of the sky onto your head."

Was there a concern that, by limiting the player to the new system's tight folio of actions, the game would become over-simplified? "Not really," says Gilbert, "I knew from playing a lot of adventure games that true complexity did not come from second-guessing the parser, but from how the objects could be applied to each other. If you compare *Maniac Mansion* to *Monkey Island*, though, it is a lot cruder and there are a lot more places where you die and the game can end in a no-win state. Those were lessons learned."

"I knew that complexity did not come from second-guessing the parser, but from how the objects could be applied to each other"

By the time the game's many platform iterations had hit their markets, the original *Mansion* team were already advancing both the engine and its application, following different but complementary paths that now equally decorate the LucasArts legend. "The sequel for *Maniac Mansion*" says Gilbert, "didn't happen for years after the original was released. David Fox wanted to do a game [*McKracken*], so that became the next one and I focused on the SCUMM system. I think I worked on the *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade* adventure game because it was a rush project that the company needed. By that time I was thinking about *Monkey Island*. I had always had this story idea for *Maniac Mansion II* that involved going back in time."

Though it would fall upon Tim Schafer and Dave Grossman to tell that story, few would argue that the ensuing tale (this time of two tentacles) was of a calibre worthy of another hallowed place in LucasArts' hall of adventuring treasures.



SCUMM-BAGS

For a game with so many tall tales to tell, it's ironic that the most extraordinary sees it becoming more conservative. When Nintendo came knocking for an NES cartridge port, LucasArts programmer Douglas Crockford paid an unexpected cost of cross-platform development – a trip through the wringer of the publishing giant's Game Standards Policy. For Nintendo, words such as 'kill' were unutterable – acceptable as a player action or an image but unprintable on screen. So pernickety were the concerns being aired, in fact, about suggested cannibalism, obscene phone calls, risqué imagery and more, that Crockford and his team would find themselves hacking out cherished dialogue in anticipation. By the time the final cut had been made (the removal of references to the game's adapted engine as NES SCUMM), a lasting opinion had already set. Crockford would sign off his subsequent article, Now You're Really Playing With Power: The Expurgation of Maniac Mansion, with a single remark: "Nintendo is a jealous god."



Studio profile

Like Top Trumps, but for game dev

COMPANY NAME: Krome Studios Pty Ltd

DATE FOUNDED: 1999

NUMBER OF EMPLOYEES: 120

HEADS OF STUDIO: Steve Stamatiadis and Robert Walsh





URL: www.kromestudios.com

SELECTED SOFTOGRAPHY

TY The Tasmanian Tiger series (GBA, GC, PS2, Xbox), *King Arthur* (GC, PS2, Xbox), *The Adventures of Jimmy Neutron: Jet Fusion* (PS2, Xbox)

KEY AREAS OF EXPERTISE:

Console 3D character action, creating intellectual property, licensed titles, proprietary technology



Robert Walsh and Steve Stamatiadis (above left and above far left) lead Krome's productions



LOCATION:
Brisbane, Australia

CURRENT PROJECTS:

TY The Tasmanian Tiger: Night Of The Quinkan (GBA, GC, PS2, Xbox), unannounced PS2, Xbox title for major publisher

PHILOSOPHY AND TECHNOLOGY

"Krome Studios firmly believes that investing in its people is essential to the life blood of the company. Employing the right people and nurturing a corporate culture in which people enjoy their work has been vital for their success. It is recognised that people give Krome its competitive advantage, as the staff fill the games with life and character, giving them their actual value.

"We have great design skills, but today that has to be coupled with great technology.

"The Merkury engine, which is the heart of most games that Krome creates, is designed to extract maximum performance from each of the many game platforms that Krome supports. Now in its fourth major revision, the engine has had over five years of continuous development and refinement. Additional production processes are highly valued by Krome, as evidenced by our flawless record for on-time and on-budget delivery. In addition to our proprietary engine, Krome has built an internal grade-A quality assurance department to streamline the game approval process and ensure on-time delivery of builds.

"Most of all the philosophy of making games at Krome is about having fun – making fun games, fun characters, fun products. Krome has been successful in being able to maintain high quality graphics, animations and game play within a relaxed atmosphere of comrades and team spirit. We have successfully found the balance between work, lifestyle and great products."



The *TY The Tasmanian Tiger* series is Australia's biggest export in terms of videogame sales

Behind the smoke and mirrors

A look at the real issues that are coming to bear on PlayStation3 game development – and how they're being addressed by the likes of Alias


Alias' Geoff Foulds

It was perhaps only fitting that the unveiling of the two arch-rival consoles at E3 was followed by an increasingly vitriolic war of words pitching real-world specifications against accusations of prerendered footage. With its desire to be overwhelmed by technology, the gaming audience seems to forget that, like a magician offering some sleight of hand for their entertainment, so console demos by their very definition won't be representative of in-game footage. Whether realtime or not – and Sony's Phil Harrison has of course clarified that the PlayStation3 footage at E3 used game-resolution models but was prerendered – the fact remains that if any demo doesn't use the sort of camera angles required to play a game, then it can't really be considered to be valid.

Of course, the other consideration lost in the demo spat is that, in many ways, it was the technology demos rather than the 'game' demos that proved to be the most impressive, if anyone took the time to consider what they were actually demonstrating. In particular Sony's appropriation of Sony Pictures' Spider-Man 2 CG footage of Alfred Molina, which it ran in realtime using high dynamic range lighting, as well as an advanced sub-surface skin scattering lighting model, pushed the boundaries of what was thought to be possible on any realtime hardware, let alone a videogame console.

Even the repurposing of assets from *The Getaway* (again, not a game demo), which included subtle effects such as the emulation of a camcorder's autofocusing as well as depth of field, showed how next-gen graphics will continue to blur the line between game realism and photorealism.

But what's always been clear is no matter how powerful the next-gen consoles may or may not be, the quality of launch titles will depend on the robustness of the development tools provided. With Xbox 360 developers still working with what are popularly labelled beta-release tools, there's plenty of upside still to be exploited.

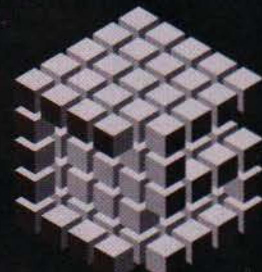

Sony's Phil Harrison found himself at the centre of a storm concerning PS3 games on video when the demos were just as interesting

"While the launch titles will be impressive, we'll have to wait until the second and third wave of games to see the real power available," reckons **Geoff Foulds**, the global industry games manager for Alias, the company behind modelling and animation tools such as Maya and MotionBuilder.

Partly, this lag gives the likes of Alias, as well as other middleware providers, such as Criterion and Havok, time to get their tools optimised for the new technology so game developers can get to grips with their potential. "In terms of our internal product development cycle, we need to get on Sony and Microsoft's middleware programme so we get early access to devkits," Foulds explains. "We need to be able to test our authoring pipeline end to end so we can get our tech working well. Next-gen consoles are all about dealing with massively parallelised and vectorised programming environments, which are completely different even compared to the multicore PC chips becoming available."

Another key issue Alias expects to be dealing with continually over the next few years remains the sheer number and size of digital assets that will be required to make a game – given that a dual-layer Blu-Ray disk has a capacity of 54Gb.

"As long as two years ago our Maya Games Advisory Council was telling us that massive datasets were going to be problem for the industry, which is one of the reasons we stripped the functionality out of a future release and put it into Maya 6.5," Foulds reveals. "The problem is you can't solve the issue with a performance boost for your tools. Those files are so big you're not going to be able to handle them on a general PC. Instead we had to put a lot more emphasis on the underlying plumbing for file referencing, trying to make sure



the system was robust enough for programmers to be able extend it while being easy enough for artists to understand it. Dataset size has been a persistent theme for a number of Maya releases and will continue to be so."

One company having to deal with a more proprietary problem is Nvidia, which is providing the RSX graphics chip, called RSX PlayStation3. Claimed as the most complex mass-production semiconductor to date, the 300 million (or more) transistor chip is currently undergoing preproduction work at Sony's Japanese fab plants prior to entering full-scale production.

Compared to the problems faced by developers trying to get games running on PlayStation2, Nvidia's decision to base the RSX on its GeForce FX 6 series of PC graphics cards will mean that there are plenty of tools available. "We've invested a ton of effect in developing tools for PC developers," says **Mark Daly**, Nvidia's vice president of content development. The key ones for PlayStation3 development are FX Composer (Nvidia's shader creation tool), and NVPerfHUD, its graphics pipeline performance analyser.

But even in this case, these tools need to be repurposed using Sony's open digital asset exchange schema Collada, which is based around the OpenGL rendering standard, as opposed to Microsoft's DirectX which Nvidia's tools have previously targeted. "One of the things we're doing at the moment is working with Sony to get these working within the PlayStation3 environment," Daly explains.

Broadly equivalent to Microsoft's much-vaunted XNA program, Collada is a more ambitious plan to get all development tools companies to ensure their file formats are compatible. Overseen by a team based at Sony Computer Entertainment America, its goal is to encompass technologies ranging from programmable shaders through to standard features such as geometry, lighting, animation and skinning as well as realtime physics. Currently work is ongoing to get a Collada application programming interface released as part of the wider SDK. This will provide developers with a C++ interface and speed up its adoption by tools vendors.

Rarely generating any news within the PlayStation3 bandwagon, the irony is that as with the technology demos, for developers, Collada will be at least as important to PlayStation3's early success as Cell or RSX. It's just another example that sometimes it's more important to look behind the headlines to find out what's really going on.



Thanks to Nvidia's work supporting its PC graphics accelerator cards, the company will be porting tools such as the shader-authoring package FX Composer to PlayStation3 via Sony's Collada digital asset exchange scheme







Absolutely not *The Getaway 3* running on PlayStation3, this technology demo (above), which nevertheless uses assets from *The Getaway* series, demonstrates the sort of real-world lighting and optical effects that should be expected on perhaps second-generation PS3 games. If you can't trust the video footage, screenshots are an even less reliable measure of a console's true power – see these examples of PlayStation3's *Motor Storm* (right) and Xbox 360's *Full Auto* (above right)



MIGHTIER THAN THE SWORD

Star quality

Poor Chris Martin, the core of Coldplay and darling of the Bleat Generation, bleating outside his field about being a slave to shareholders. The band is late delivering its wares and is petulantly surprised when the client (in this case EMI) is not best pleased.

"Deadlines mean nothing to us," said Martin, with his hardman hat on. "We'll sink the whole company [EMI] if we have to."

Get her. The 'interactive entertainment' industry may not have the personal visibility of its more established contemporaries but there are certainly enough developers who agree with Martin's pretensions.

I used to be one of them, enjoying whining about commercial oppression and the rights of artists, boasting about working for love not money (when the reality is, if I really cared I would have been aiming to earn millions to plough back into 'the art' at a later date).

Throughout history, self-proclaimed artists have begrudgingly taken on commissions from royalty and other patrons with more money than sense, just to pay the rent. Then they moan about the lion gnawing on their bones, knowing that's the nature of the beast – that's what they do, that's the way it is.

It's. A. Business. You can't expect to squander your time with someone else's money to take an extended trip up your own arsehole when alternative financial investments are rife (some of them altruistic). The fact is Coldplay, like so many other 'artists', entered into a contract to create an entertainment product to be sold in a commercial environment – a product to be made visible and desirable and available to as many people as possible by a defined date. Do artists have any other choice if they want to make statements or share their precious dreams with the world? Yes. Give it away if being appreciated means that much.

Our industry is full of artists who feel they are suffering for their art, but popular or cultural interest in them is negligible. Beyond the boundaries of their own domain, our stars just aren't illuminated by the media spotlight. Comparisons with Hollywood directors seem appropriate. With film, most people are more interested in the product and the performers – not behind the scenes. The worship is only skin-deep. Only the cognoscenti dig deeper and discern directors, writers and other artisans.

But where are our superstars? I don't mean the geeks, hippies and kindly uncle figures. I mean dirty, drug-fuelled, newsworthy freaks that burn brightly at work and play and leave great-looking corpses. Of course, I'm not suggesting for a minute that drink and drugs are big, hard, clever or grown up (even though they are great in moderation), but surely there must be more to (or, perhaps more accurately, more to be made of) our authors?

> Do artists have any other choice if they want to make statements or share their precious dreams with the world? Yes

It's not as if the industry is squeaky clean – although the development community at worst is laddish rather than outlandish and, even then, never exposed to the rest of the world. Will we ever see a day when computer and videogame designers make the front page of the red tops with All Night Three In A Bed Coke Romp?

Second-rate celebrities are commonly caught in compromising positions. The media obsesses over them, waiting for them to trip and fall so they can be kicked while they are down. But who in the real world cares about the lives of the computer and videogames creator?

Column-inches and cemeteries are packed with actors, directors, musicians, writers, painters, sculptors and other artists with a heady and highly visible combination of talent and salacious private lives (admittedly some only revealed post mortem).

What do we have? That nice young Carmack boy. That ever-so-erudite Molyneux fellow. That cheeky little Miyamoto chap. That slightly kooky hippy Minter lurking somewhere in the background. American McGee. John Romero. Spector. Meier. Wright. Braben. Kojima. Mizuguchi. Matsuura. So there are plenty of names – but no real faces. No Gallagher, Burroughs, Nicholson or Simpson. No performers. No attitude. No abnormal lifestyles. No personalities. Not even a requisite complement of overt homosexuals.

It might involve and evoke extreme passion, it might be hard graft, but the reality is the process of making entertainment is hardly ever entertaining or even interesting – and the same is typically true of its makers. These days, teams of dozens make the magic happen, making it harder to identify who should be proclaimed the genuine creative genius. Is that whoever had the original idea? Whoever made the repertoire exist? Whoever made the repertoire look so pretty? Whoever made use of the repertoire to create so many memorable moments? Whoever is most media friendly?

Genius is making something from nothing – making the ordinary extraordinary – and doing it with aplomb. Those who exploit their repertoire so well deserve respect but shouldn't expect that to extend to adulation from the mass market.

Gary Penn began his career on Zzap!64, before working at BMG and DMA Design. He now makes games at Denki





BY TIM GUEST

THE GUEST COLUMN

Virtual painkillers

A few months ago, I wrote about Wilde Cunningham – the nine disabled residents of a Boston day-care centre who log on to *Second Life* to live together inside one virtual body online, in a new life freed from disability and shame. For them, the liberation from their physical selves turns a negative into a positive. It's not avoidance, it's liberation; they are happy to leave the real world. But there's also another group of people who arguably have even more reason to emigrate from the real world. Another group for whom the journey through the electronic looking-glass means a journey to a world with less pain. Those with a condition which is acknowledged to be the most painful known to medicine: burn victims.

Dr Hunter Hoffman's interest in virtual reality began with an interest in how people remembered what was real and what was imaginary. Using early-'90s VR equipment, he discovered that a combination of visual and tactile information produced the greatest immersion in digitally created worlds – he simulated eating a chocolate bar, and, as the subject ate the digital bar, he put a real chocolate bar into their mouth. What he noticed was that the combination of virtual and real totally absorbed the patients; they would ignore everything else going on around them. He began to consider who would best benefit from this absence from reality. An encounter with David Patterson, a psychologist who had been using hypnosis to ease pain, led to a decision to collaborate. At first they worked together for free, in their spare time, until, after some early and remarkable results, Paul Allen, a co-founder of Microsoft, stepped in to support the research.

> Using early-'90s VR equipment, he discovered that a combination of visual and tactile information produced the greatest immersion

Serious burns need to be redressed every day, an agonising process that takes up to an hour. Damaged pain receptors report constant pain, and most of these are in the skin. Hoffman began each study by asking how much they enjoyed having their bandages changed. His patients used to ask if he was crazy. Some grew furious with the question. A few weeks later, after hanging out in Hoffman's Snow World – they donned VR helmets to throw virtual snowballs at virtual snowmen while the bandages were changed – patients reported a six or seven on a scale of enjoyment from one to ten. It was the most painful part of their treatment, and they were starting to enjoy it.

Hoffman has a vision of a world in which virtual reality is just another technique for easing peoples' pain. "It's like a normal dose response: someone in more pain needs more morphine," Hoffman told me, on the phone from his mother's house in San Diego. "When you're trying to treat burn pain, you're treating someone who's *really* in pain. To help them, you need a really good virtual world." After his success with burn patients, Hoffman began work with other psychologists to extend his virtual-reality cognitive therapy to other areas of treatment. Working with Dr JoAnn Difede, assistant professor of psychiatry at New York Presbyterian Hospital, Hoffman developed a simulation to help those traumatised by the World Trade Center attacks. "They start by looking up at the World Trade Center, completely intact, on a beautiful blue-sky morning," Hoffman explained. "A lot of times, that alone is enough to elicit an emotional reaction. But after an hour or so, when they're comfortable with the buildings, we cause a plane to fly by. It doesn't crash, but it really upsets them. The difference between doing this on a computer screen, and doing it with a tracking VR helmet like we do, is that the illusion of going back, of actually being there, is infinitely increased. It's September 11 again. Then we move on to a plane which crashes, but with no sound, no explosion. We do it over and over, for hours, until they're at a point where they're upset but not desperate to leave the room. Then we add sound effects. A booming explosion, people screaming. A second plane crashes, then the towers collapse, smoke, sirens, people, confusion. It's very effective." Of seven patients to date, six have improved dramatically. All had failed to respond to other treatment.

Hoffman is also working with the US army to develop treatment for soldiers returned from war zones with post-traumatic stress disorder. With more funding from Allen, Hoffman is working with a therapist from Haifa University in Israel to treat survivors of suicide bombings.

I asked about the technology behind the virtual scenarios. "Before I started using VR, a good VR computer was $175,000. Soon after I started, a new one came out, which cost $90,000. When I started working with burn patients, a really good machine was $45,000. Now, you can buy a computer for $3,000, which is just as good. You can use a laptop." What about the software? "Well, we're using custom software at the moment, developed by the US military. I'm looking at new software, though, at the moment. It looks fantastic. State of the art."

"Really?" I asked. "Which one?"

"*Unreal Tournament*," he said.

Tim Guest is an author and veteran videogame/technology journalist. His book, My Life In Orange, is published by Granta



Illustration: tstokes


BY MR BIFFO

BIFFOVISION

Burn, Hollywood, burn

Since retiring from full-time games journalism I've forged something approaching a career as a TV scriptwriter. Doubtless you will now have formed a picture in your heads of the glamorous lifestyle I must therefore lead, perhaps involving me snorting cocaine off a mandrill's bottom while reclining in the back of a rocket car shaped like a top hat – well, such scenarios do indeed form much of my working life, but the remaining 25 per cent or so is mostly meetings.

It was at one such meeting recently that my former career intersected with my current one. A broadcaster was looking for a writer to help develop a project – which for anonymity's sake I shall call 'Junior Samurai' – that had begun life as a videogame. Somehow, I'd been recommended as experienced both in animation and samurai-themed television (not entirely true but hey, whatever).

> Someone with an entirely different set of skills and experience was to decide whether I could do a job I'd been performing for ten years

From what I could gather, the developer behind the game had decided that 'Junior Samurai' (the concept could've been written up in two minutes on the back of a snotty tissue) was brilliant enough to work as some sort of multimedia brand. At some point it had been proposed to a broadcaster who had been sufficiently drunk to ask to see more.

I was invited to pitch for how I would help develop the existing show bible were I to be appointed lead writer. My enthusiasm hovered somewhere around tepid, but I was prepared to display willing. However, the minute I walked through the door I knew I hadn't got the job.

Before I'd even opened my mouth, it was clear that the representative of the broadcaster simply wasn't interested. Perhaps she didn't like my trousers, or maybe she thought the project itself was a lame duck, but for whatever reason the rude bint didn't look up from her mobile for the duration.

In the face of this distracting indignity I was left to outline my lacklustre vision for the show to the man from the games company. Sadly, although a polite enough fellow, he clearly didn't understand the first thing about writing for kids' TV. And to be honest, I probably blew what chance I had when I told him the existing series bible read like a videogame design document and the characters had all the emotional depth of end-of-level bosses.

By the meeting's end my disapprobation was extreme. Not just because of the indolent, text-frenzied hag behind the desk, but because someone with an entirely different set of skills and experience was to decide whether I could do a job I'd been performing for almost ten years. And I've got a BAFTA nomination! And a Sony Award for radio comedy! And – and – I'm the greatest guy in the world *ever*!

A few years back I interviewed the CEO of a well-established British developer. The firm had acquired a stable of international brands, which it hoped to develop into games. For reasons which can only be described as inexplicable, the company was also looking to turn several of these brands into big-budget movies. During our interview, the CEO made a real fuss about the major stars with whom they were already in negotiations and, without a hint of humility, revealed that he was even helping to write the screenplays himself.

As far as he was concerned his films were as good as in the can. But as our conversation progressed it became clear to me that here was someone – again, a perfectly pleasant chap – who was utterly out of his depth, splashing around in an industry he just didn't understand.

Yes, his firm was responsible for some mega-selling titles. Yes, he was a multi-millionaire with a pair of solid gold shoes. That didn't make him Steven Spielberg. Consequently, his films are probably no closer to getting made now, four years on, than they ever were.

I'd wager that about 40 per cent of the money I've earned from screenwriting is for projects that have never been made. Films, sitcoms, dramas, kids' shows – I've done the lot. One person I know even got the green light for an eight-part, primetime ITV series, only to see the entire thing fall apart two weeks before principle photography was due to begin.

As a writer you get used to it, through bitter experience. I knew that the aforementioned CEO's films wouldn't be getting made any time soon, same as I have my doubts that 'Junior Samurai' will ever make it to TV screens.

But these aren't the only incidents of developers trying to claw their way into Hollywood. It's like a successful optician deciding to branch out into hat repair, or something. Is it desperation over the state of a games industry continually on the verge of collapse? Is it embarrassment at working in an industry still perceived as targeted at oily, teenage boys? Or is it simply vanity?

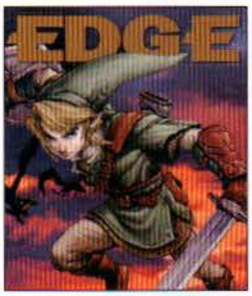
The thing is, games aren't films any more than the games industry is the film industry. There are different rules and different strategies and film and TV are well-oiled, well-honed machines. By comparison, the games industry is still creaking with growing pains.

Mr Biffo co-founded Digitiser, Channel 4's Teletext-based videogames section, and now writes mainly for television



Illustration:

inbox



Issue 150

There is no reason for you to be reviewing Japanese versions of Nintendo DS titles in a UK games magazine unless they are intended as reviews for those wishing to import Japanese versions of the games. So why not let us know how easy or difficult it is to play and understand the game if you're a non-Japanese speaker? I'm referring specifically to your review of *Meteos* and preview of *Electroplankton* in E149. Or are we to assume that any game you review in this manner is perfectly playable and understandable? Otherwise, I see little point in their inclusion.
Robert Munns

Each month we aim to review the most significant new games available, regardless of their territory of release. Nowadays, the ready availability of online guides and translation sites means that almost any game is accessible to someone determined to get to grips with it. Some games, of course, rely heavily on language for their richness and depth, and these we review when English-language versions become available.

The two timeless concerns of the devoted gamer have been on my mind this month. Yes – the opposite sex and the fate of Nintendo!

Make no mistake, I am not immune to the sleek charms of the PSP. Yes, it's the sexiest piece of gaming hardware ever, sitting there with its pornstar screen making 16:9 sound like the new 69. Surely, however, there's room for the PSP and the DS – not just in different sectors of the market but also in the same person's pocket?

Lumines and *Yoshi's Touch & Go*? I for one wouldn't say no. With any generation of hardware, different consoles have desirable titles (*Mario 64* and *Final Fantasy VII*, *Halo 2* and *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas*, and so on).

Mr Biffo's column (**E**149) got me thinking. Could it really be the media that will determine the respective success of the two main handhelds – in other words, the chance of the PSP playing nicely and sharing? That this could be as or more important than the Sony mainstream marketing big guns and the PSexapPeal?

On a recent trip to North America, I found that this was certainly the case over there. A lesser periodical than your own – a quid cheaper but half the size and with more adverts – went as far as including, in its review of *Yoshi Touch And Go*, the awful words 'if you've just dropped $150 on a DS and are starting to wonder why'. Let's face it, both machines' software lineups are appealing, if slender at present.

That other organ went on to include interviews with two of the magazine writers, who were asked which handheld would win the war. Both said definitely the PSP, heralding it as the most important thing to happen in gaming for years.

Surely that's not a fair thing to say to impressionable young minds? And, while we're on the subject, the cover of **Edge** 149 was a little PSP-biased, don't you think? Poor old N-Gage, nearly out of shot, as in life.

But perhaps there is hope. The PSP was still readily available two weeks after its American launch, Vancouver's Sony Store display mocking my passing wallet each day.

As for Nedeem Augbaya's letter, thanks for that, it will be of great consolation during lonely sessions of *Halo 2* or *Ico*. Sob. Let's just say that for some gamers, worrying about finding games to play with one's girlfriend is a little premature. No, our best hope is meeting a green-haired waif-girl, with giant eyes and a sword, on a bus to Swindon and engaging in some bonding via wireless multiplayer with our handhelds. Better make sure we buy both the PSP and the DS, then, in case she's only got the one.
Graham Wood

For some, our best hope is meeting a green-haired waif-girl, with giant eyes and a sword, on a bus and bonding via wireless multiplayer on our handhelds

There's no doubt that the new handhelds are going to shift the gaming demographic, even if they can't shift some gamers' prejudice. And the idea of using your DS to make new friends isn't fantastical: the link-up feature of *Nintendogs* (p89) is already allowing players to swap email addresses as easily as rare dog bowties.

Mark Ecko – is that his name? That 'oh-so-trendy' American 'kid with his trendy baseball cap, and his 'street cred', and his continual insistence that we nerdy developers 'get wiv da kidz, man!'

Apart from being incapable of realising that most of us consider Ali G a joke and not a role model, this guy seems to think that 'da kewl urban kidz' are a genre we aren't marketing to. As far as I can tell, every game on earth is marketed at them.

I just wrote a game (www.democracygame.com) that was aimed squarely at older, more cerebral players with an interest in politics. 'Da kidz' probably hate it.

Funny, really, because it's selling like hot cakes and the people who buy it rave about it. Maybe all other developers are busy selling to 'da kidz'?

I'll stick to selling grown-up games, thanks, Mark.
Cliff Harris

Ah, the unveiling of the Xbox 360 was a bit different, wasn't it? No trade shows, no E3, nothing like Miyamoto walking up to the podium and quietly unveiling the new baby. Instead? MTV, Elijah Wood and The Killers. You know, maybe videogames are cool. Fine, the thing itself may end up giving Microsoft another opportunity to tighten its grip on our digital lives, and (as shown in your GDC article in **E**149) it'll make developers' lives hell with the new expectations, but when it's wrapped up in pretty lights, 'The OC' coolness and advert breaks, then you could end up with a new era in videogames getting the respect they deserve, only to be undone spectacularly on sight of *Counter-Strike* fanboyism.

Now let's see Sony's response.
Ben Perkins

While Microsoft's decision to eschew E3 gave the company a substantial initial boost in the mainstream media, it also opened the door for Sony to dominate the industry's attention in Los Angeles (for more on this, see this month's extensive report in Start). But while it alienated traditionalists, there's no question it kickstarted the 360 publicity trail, which only has a few months to run before the machine is actually released.



Edge should refrain from reviewing games like *Meteos* in their original Japanese incarnations, says Robert Munns, for fear of confusion

It has become more and more apparent recently that retailers seem to want nothing to do with the GameCube. As an extremely happy GameCube owner, this is beginning to get on my nerves.

I have noticed that many shops have now removed all GameCube games from their shelves completely, with those that do still sell the software only devoting a small part of the store to it. I'm not surprised that the GameCube is in third place among consoles if we're not able to buy any games for it.

Developers are to blame, as well. When I was at the Edinburgh International Games Festival last year, I went to the *Lego Star Wars* game screening and at the end I asked the man doing the presentation why he had decided to release his game for the PlayStation2, the Xbox and PCs – but not the 'Cube. He said that he thought there were simply not enough of the consoles around to make it worthwhile.

I find that very interesting because *Resident Evil 4* was sold out all across Scotland in mere days (or so I was reliably informed by an employee of Gamestation after a long day trying to find a copy). Surely if that happens there are enough GameCubes around to sell *Lego Star Wars*?

Perhaps the retailers and some developers (not all – I would like to praise those who still feel that the console is worth their time and effort) simply looked at how the original PlayStation become more popular than the Nintendo 64 and just let the trend continue with this generation of consoles. But they gave the PS2 an unfair advantage by being biased towards it right from the very start, and now they've evidently just decided to forget all about the 'Cube when fantastic titles such as *Resi 4* and the *Zelda* series are still being released.

It's a shame this great console wasn't given more of a chance, because I'm sure many other people would have enjoyed it as much as I have, if the people responsible for making games and selling them had given it the support it deserved.

Jonathan Kean

All games have different financial models, and copies selling out isn't necessarily evidence of a large userbase. That said, there's no doubt that the GameCube has failed to escape its Catch-22: not a wide enough range of software to attract owners, and not enough owners to attract a wide enough range of software.

Until high-quality developers and publishers can find a way of communicating more complex ideas to the general public, the likes of Nintendo will lose out

Richard Cross's letter (E149) about *Resident Evil 4* was poorly argued and full of inaccuracies.

For one, the 'Z word' is mentioned in the game (examine the first dead person and Leon remarks: "Clearly not a zombie"). I doubt that anything in that game was rushed in development. From start to finish it exudes quality. I'd also imagine that running and shooting a gun is far more difficult then he thinks. And to say he can do something like that in real life? Er, what exactly does he do with his weekends?

In fact, if you actually look at most realistic television shows or films where guns are used, the people are generally stationary and steady in order to get an accurate shot – otherwise you just spray wildly. The use of the laser pointer in *Resi 4* encourages and rewards such accurate aiming.

Cross is also on shaky ground when he contrasts what you can do in a computer game to what you can do in real life. Indeed you could argue that *Resi 4* is more accurate, since you can't see behind your back, unlike most computer games (including *Splinter Cell*). There is certainly an interesting debate there and far bigger then I could cover in this letter. Suffice to say that every game I've ever played has a limit on what you can and can't do.

Every game also has to have a control system/viewpoint. Some will suit you and some won't. The decision to do an over-the-shoulder system in *Resi 4* was obviously deliberate and it works. To put a *Splinter Cell* control system would have turned it into a different game. *Metroid Prime* was originally going to be a thirdperson shooter. How much different a game would it have been? The reason why it got countless good reviews the world over is because it's a great game.

Emperor's new clothes? If the threads are this good, I only wish more developers would visit that tailor.

Alec Weldon

We sort of promised ourselves we wouldn't perpetuate this one, but we've been playing *RE4* again of late and, yes, it's still great, isn't it?

I'm concerned about the level of intolerance shown on gaming forums and within the gaming community as a whole. I recently read a thread on the GamesRadar forum where a member expressed anger that a certain large publisher should sell low-quality games to Joe Bloggs on the street, saying that it was simply flogging games to the great unwashed and somehow unethically profiting from Joe Bloggs' ignorance.

The problem with this is the implication that if people were simply forced to play 'decent' games they'd automatically realise what they'd been missing out on. The mistake people like this individual make is that they incorrectly perceive the behaviour of human beings.

People don't respond well to being told how to run their lives and if they're forced to do something, they're likely to rebel against it rather than actually realise the added fun that can be gained from playing a high-quality game.

The secret is persuasion, rather than shoving games down people's throats. And the way publishers persuade gamers to buy into their products is through effective marketing. It's easier to communicate simple ideas to the mass of the population (who probably naturally don't take as much interest as the 'hardcore' in gaming) because they are just that: simple ideas, easily coded.

Until high-quality developers and publishers can find a way of communicating more complex ideas to the general public, the likes of Nintendo will continue to lose out. Who knows – maybe the DS and Revolution *will* be enough to persuade non-gamers into gaming, but they certainly won't be if they are not communicated effectively.

Patrick Graham

Which takes us back, again, to the subject of marketing. Will promotional work for next-generation games represent any kind of evolutionary leap?

Before raising the idea of investigating this issue, I realise that you mentioned in a previous issue the emerging aspects of Alternate Reality Games such as the BBC's *Jamie Kane* game. I feel, however, that a more in-depth look at these games should be given by your writers in a forthcoming issue, especially with online games such as *Perplex City* (www.perplexcity.com) providing new and potentially revolutionary ways of looking at the

Continued

ways in which we engage with games. Perhaps even a glance at websites such as the Alternate Reality Gaming Network (www.argn.com) would suggest that the emergence of these games is perhaps a move into the mainstream, and that these games provide a level of interactivity unseen in other conventional formats.
Martin Hollis

Interestingly, alternate reality gaming, despite being initially perceived as one of the 'geekier' offshoots of traditional gaming, is one that is drawing in many new players. Expect more coverage in the coming months.

With the release of the next generation to be on us in the (near) future, I'm asking whether the power of these consoles should be regulated. The new consoles are going to give gamers unprecedented graphical power, but aren't these machines almost too powerful? I think *Fight Night: Round 3*, in particular, is going to be so realistic that it'll be kinda scary. I'm not sure I'd be happy having my kids thinking that such a realistic portrayal of violence should be classed as enjoyment.

Should there be limits on the realism? This is uncharted territory and maybe someone needs to step in now and say that if the images can be mistaken for real events then the violence must be made to look artificial, to stop the already impressionable youth from believing they can perform similar acts in the real world.
David Fowkes

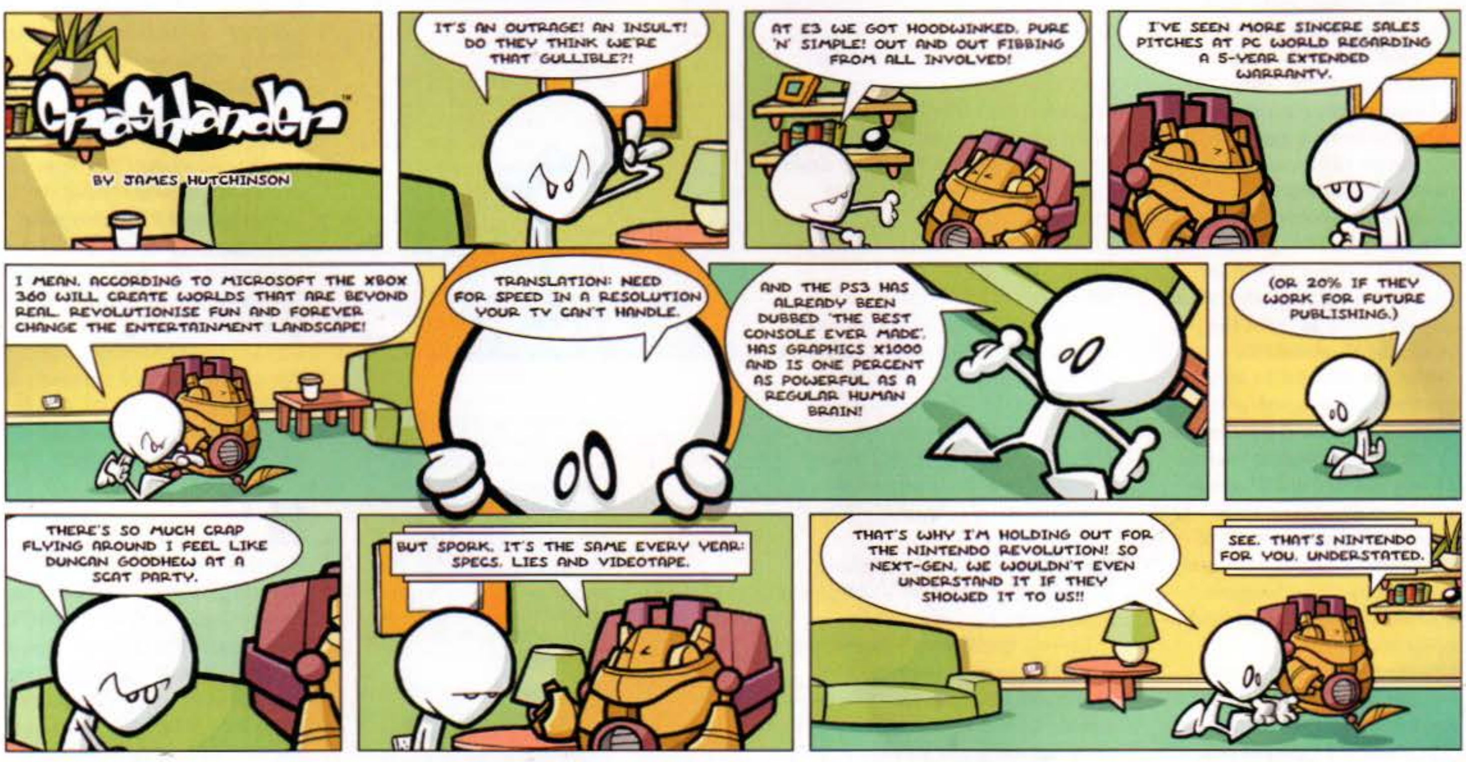
A key part of the question of videogaming violence has always been the importance of what is being portrayed versus how visually realistic that portrayal is. Is *Custer's Revenge* really any less offensive just because it's represented by crude pixels? Would anyone really argue that it wouldn't be substantially more offensive if the rape was depicted in unflinching close-up, with the humanity and detail of a next-gen tech demo? Previously, the graphical simplicity of some games have made it easier to overlook the moral implications of your in-game actions – from now on it's going to be much harder to duck the responsibility. So, perhaps, the technical advance of gaming may have the opposite effect, making the violence in games more realistic, more consequence-ridden and therefore much less alluring.

In a similar style to the letter from Paul Shotton (E149), it would be nice if someone would remind him that I did phone the number he supplied, weeks earlier, and asked for the UK version of the cable. But I was supplied with the European version, which has incidentally been binned. Even if I had asked for the wrong one, surely the big M would know better than to send a Euro plug to a UK address – or is that a little too much for XP to handle?
Rob Collins

Now, Rob, don't say you're backing away from the conspiracy theory as well. A computer error is even less fun than a human one.

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